

# **Eternal Rest**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

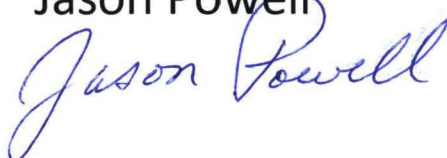
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in collaboration with

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# Abstract

THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW HISTORY ARE DESTINED TO REPEAT IT...

The words of Edmund Burke ring true in *Eternal Rest*. Paul Barnes was never close to his father. When he loses him, however, he begins down a spiraling path of destruction and redemption. But the path leads Paul back to where he started, and he finds himself caught in a never-ending battle with time in an attempt to correct his course.

Do you ever wonder if you were never supposed to be here, like you're missing out on something somewhere else? Paul Barnes did. Will he break the fatal cycle or fall into eternal despair?

*Eternal Rest* is a short story I co-authored with fellow Honors student, friend, and roommate Casey Fish. It addresses several concepts of existentialism – reality, acceptance, eternal recurrence, and death – that we drew from some of our Honors classes at Ball State and explores them in narrative form. The story also gave Casey and me a chance to experiment with a concept that has always fascinated both of us: time travel.

# Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my partner for the project, Casey Fish, for collaborating with me on *Eternal Rest*. His creative thinking, work ethic, and teamwork were very much appreciated and helped make this project the best it could be.

I would also like to thank Jason Powell for advising me on this project. He was honored when we approached him with the idea and never lost that excitement throughout the entire process. His creative suggestions, as well as his grammatical expertise, helped us rework and refine our writing.

# Artist Statement

For my entire life, I have been an avid writer and a fan of creative narratives. I began writing stories for my own enjoyment when I was a child, usually accompanying them with my own illustrations. Even through high school, creative writing classes were among my favorites and provided me with an outlet for my tireless imagination. However, when I started my collegiate career at Ball State University, my major of telecommunications did not allow me to express the full range of my literary capabilities. I found myself taking advantage of any opportunity to fit creative writing into my course work, particularly in my Honors Humanities courses. To me, it only made sense to utilize my Honors Thesis as a final chance to employ my creative writing skills before beginning a career in TV news and sports.

My partner for this project, Casey Fish, shares my love for creative writing. In fact, we spent much of 2008 and 2009 co-authoring a fantasy short story, which we shared among a few friends. During the course of writing that story, we came up with an idea for another, longer and more psychologically stimulating story that eventually became this project. We knew our prior experience in creative writing – both individually and collaboratively – and our friendship would allow us to work together effectively. However, to ensure that we both were still able to produce thesis-worthy work on our own, we planned out extensively how we would approach the project.

First, we fleshed out an outline and an abstract for the story, which we presented to our thesis advisor, Jason Powell. We chose Jason for our advisor because he was the instructor for the HONRS 199 course on existentialism which Casey and I took together. Jason was both



excited about the material he presented to us and sincerely interested in our opinions, which produced many lively class discussions. It was this series of discussions that first attracted us to explore the existential concepts – concepts like free will, eternal return, and reality – that drive our story. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, presents an argument for suicide as the sensible course of action in a meaningless life. This is a concept that Stephen Barnes grapples with in our story; when faced with a life that many would consider hopeless, he turns to suicide and makes several attempts at his life before successfully taking it.

Once Jason approved our outline, he suggested a few more resources to help get us started. While the works we read in class provided the existential concepts for our story, it was these resources which gave us the mode through which to incorporate these existential elements: time travel. From each, we drew inspiration for different aspects of dealing with the scientific phenomena of time travel, based on how different directors have treated it effectively in the past. *The Butterfly Effect* was the first, and we based the method of time travel in our story from this movie. In *The Butterfly Effect*, the main character discovers that his trips to the past are triggered by reading excerpts of the journal he kept as a child. In our story, Paul Barnes's travels through time occur when he stares at different photos from the past. In both instances, the character travels back to the exact instant that the journal or photo is capturing.

However, one major difference between the jumps through time in *The Butterfly Effect* and *Eternal Rest* is the identity of the character upon arrival in the new time. In *Eternal Rest*, the consciousness of Paul Barnes does not get transferred into his younger self after a time jump, but rather he appears as his present self. This means his time travels are not limited to the duration of his lifetime; Paul is able to meet his father as a college student, before he was

ever born. He also can create a reality with multiple versions of himself. Both of these concepts are inspired by the interpretation of time travel in another movie, *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

A third movie, *Donnie Darko*, gave us the inspiration for the character and personality of Paul Barnes. He is in many ways a reflection of title character Donnie Darko, a troubled youth whose life is full of depression and hopelessness. He also has no control over his time travel or the consequences it brings, much like Paul in *Eternal Rest*.

Finally, we were inspired by an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entitled "Cause and Effect." In this episode, the Enterprise gets caught in a time loop, causing its crew members to relive the same events over and over again. Eventually, certain members begin to experience feelings of déjà vu and recall what is about to happen enough to change course and break the loop. We utilized this déjà vu experience in *Eternal Rest*, as Paul begins to sense feelings of familiarity in his second and third times through the loop.

With our resources in mind, Casey and I planned our line of attack. We knew from past collaborative experiences that writing together was a long, arduous, and stressful approach to co-authoring a book, so we decided to alternate duties. Before beginning each chapter, we would go over what needed to be covered in the chapter, how we were going to get from one event to the next, and any important dialogue that would be included in the chapter. Then one of us would begin writing and complete a few pages before handing off to the other person, who would do the same and repeat the process until the chapter was written. We were also constantly proofreading each other's sections and offering any revisions we deemed necessary.

In this way, we were able to maintain a consistent writing style while trading writing duties back and forth.

After every two chapters had been finished, we met with Jason to let him read the section and offer grammatical corrections and creative advice. Casey and I both made the final revisions together – based on Jason’s suggestions – after the initial draft of the story was complete. The last step was getting the book printed, which we did through lulu.com, a self-publishing website. We went through the layout, cover design, and jacket text together to achieve a finished product of the highest possible quality.

Casey and I believe the finished product not only represents our best work as Ball State students, but also embodies a story that can be universally appreciated. While it does deal with death and suicide – as well as offer an eerie title taken from burial rites – we wrote it with no particular demographic in mind. Our story is for anyone interested in scientific anomalies and their ethical implications. Potential readers should approach the text open to ponder many of the great questions that have been asked for centuries: what is real? How does one learn to accept death? What are the implications of my everyday actions? Our story addresses these questions and others as well, but it leaves the answers open-ended. We believe it is our job as authors to ask these questions and encourage educated contemplation, while ultimately leaving it up to the readers to decide the answers for themselves.

However, there were many decisions we had to make ourselves in the process of the project. The first was choosing a reasonable length for our story, one that is long enough to capture the necessary elements of existential thought and short enough to be able to complete in one semester. We decided on eight chapters, each roughly ten pages, for a total of 80 pages.



We followed this plan surprisingly well; our finished product contained eight chapters and a total of 93 pages. Another important decision was how to make time travel believable so as not to detract from the story. As encouraged by Jason, we decided not to dwell on the scientific explanations of warping the fabric of the space-time continuum, which readers would be likely to forget anyway. Our method of photos coming to life before Paul Barnes' eyes and sending him back in time to that moment is one that borders the fantastic while still remaining sensible enough to keep the focus on the plot.

We also spent much deliberation on the names of our main two characters. After researching time travel and existential philosophy, we settled on Paul and Stephen Barnes. Paul's name is derived from Paul Tillich, an existential philosopher, while Stephen's name comes from Stephen Hawking, a physicist whose work has dealt with anomalies such as time travel and black holes. Their last name, Barnes, was inspired by Hazel E. Barnes, a recently deceased American philosopher known for her translations of Jean-Paul Sartre's works.

The ending to *Eternal Rest* was a much-debated subject as well. Casey and I decided that using time travel to rewrite the past and create a new, happy reality in which everyone lived would conflict with the concept of acceptance. Therefore, we have Paul end up right where he started, but with the realization from his experiences that things had to happen the way they did, and he must accept it. We also left the ending somewhat open-ended by the presence of the tall man in the dark overcoat. We hope this causes readers to wonder if that man is a version of Paul from the future, meaning the cyclical time travels may not be over, and also provides us with the opening for a possible sequel.

Throughout the process of writing the story and molding it into book format, Casey and I developed several skills that are critical to both of our future professions. Not only did we learn many of the ins and outs of creative writing, we learned to work collaboratively. This was especially difficult since writing is traditionally a very autonomous occupation. We also improved in our time management abilities. It was difficult to motivate each other to meet self-imposed deadlines, but we were able to complete our entire story and have time to self-publish it in a timely manner.

The result of our efforts was a story that succinctly and simply conveyed many difficult questions of existence: death, recurrence, meaning, free will, and the nature of time and reality. Our story is sophisticated in its philosophical implications yet approachable for a lay audience unversed in concepts of time travel and existentialism. It is our sincere hope that our readers will take pleasure in our narrative, and that this story may instill in them the desire to question the nature of existence.

# *Eternal Rest*



Eric Peat  
and  
Casey Fish



## Introduction



*"Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord."  
"And let perpetual light shine upon him."*

Paul Barnes did not recite the words along with the rest of those gathered at the cemetery. His soft grey eyes were locked in a cold unfeeling stare as he stood completely oblivious to his surroundings. His thoughts were elsewhere, as they had been for days. Stephen Barnes had never been the best father to Paul, but he was a father nonetheless. Perhaps it was that separation between the two of them that left Paul feeling particularly numb after his father's death. Now he knew he would never have the chance to share in any father-son moments, let alone experience the warmth of a father's embrace. The truth hit him hard, just like the cold rain that pelted his head as the priest continued speaking.

*"May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed,  
through the mercy of God, rest in peace."*

*Rest in peace?* Paul repeated in his head, suddenly jolted back into consciousness. *Easy for you to say, preacher. You've done this a thousand times, and never once for anyone who really mattered to you. You're not the one who has to take this home with you.* His last thoughts, though more bitter than intended, gave Paul a surprisingly satisfying feeling. *And what about those of us who have to live with this? Do you really expect us to be able to rest in peace?* If Paul knew anything about the first 22 years of his life, it was that they had been everything but peaceful. The feelings of isolation from his family, the empty childhood friendships, the dreams – *Yes, the dreams*, thought Paul. *The nightmares that have haunted me throughout my entire life. If anyone were responsible for my father's death, it would be me.*

*"May the love of God and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ  
bless and console us and gently wipe every tear from our eyes:  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."*

As a chorus of "Amen's" passed through the mourning family and friends, Paul could not bring himself to echo their accord. *I am responsible for my father's death. It was my dreams that pushed him away from me and towards self-abuse. If only I had never –*

A tall man in a dark overcoat brushed up against Paul's shoulder as the crowd began to disperse.

"I'm sorry for your loss, kid," the man offered in a gruff voice.

Paul managed a nod in response before turning to leave. He could hear his mother's soft sobbing as she trudged to their car.

"C'mon, Paulie, let's go home," she said.

Paul hesitated as he stood before his father's coffin one last time. *I don't blame you, Dad. How can a man forgive a son who dreams of his own father's death?*



## Chapter 1



There were eight steps on the staircase up to the attic in the Barnes' house. Paul knew this well; every Christmas, his mother would enlist him to venture up into the attic and retrieve the family decorations for the holiday season. He would always complain, his mother would always insist with firm yet restrained words, and that would be that. This year was different, however, as Paul made no protest against his mother's request, but instead turned towards the attic stairs without speaking a word.

*Christmas again.* His steps took him up the old wooden staircase. Paul had never been all that crazy about the holiday in the first place. Sure, it must be great for close-knit families who gather together Christmas morning with the aroma of a freshly-cut evergreen in the air and the warmth of a fire at their backs. But for the Barnes family, it had always felt like more of a chore to go shopping for gifts – gifts that would prove essentially useless and find themselves stuffed in the back of a closet within a week or two. Each Christmas morning in the Barnes household, presents were opened, expressions of thanks were exchanged, and each person went on with the remainder of the day as if it were any other day of the year.

Still, Paul could not help but feel a bit nostalgic this holiday season. It was the first since his father's death nearly seven months ago, and while some things were getting back to normal at home, others were not. The house somehow seemed smaller without Stephen Barnes inside it. Despite how rare and unspectacular family time had been in the past, Paul felt an inkling of remorse knowing that it would never be the same without his father.

*Now, where did I put those boxes of decorations last year?* He scanned the attic floor. A few dozen boxes lay scattered across the floor, half buried in scraps of insulation. The labels ranged from "Baby clothes" to "Photo albums" to "Granddad's keepsacks." Paul had to suppress a laugh as he read the last one; his mother had never been a champion speller.

Then his eyes fell upon a lone shoebox sitting in the corner near the window. *I don't remember seeing you before.* He inched his way towards the box, tiptoeing around the clutter until he could reach it. Paul extended a curious hand to wipe the dust off the shoebox, which by the looks of it, had not been opened in quite some time. The box had no label – just a single piece of masking tape securing the lid.

Paul's eyes narrowed as he picked up the box and gently opened it. He recognized the pile of old photographs of his father. Some were from recent years. But others were from much earlier in his father's life, and a few were from his college years, before The Incident. *Ah, yes, The Incident. Dad never really spoke of it much, except to curse it. Mom would only ever speak of how he had changed dramatically after it happened.* He



paused. *I guess it's not that hard to believe, when you lose one of your best friends and your eyesight in the same moment.*

The photo on the top of the pile was by far the most recent; it was taken on his father's fishing trip with a few buddies from the rehabilitation center sixteen months back. Paul could tell this was during his father's second stint in rehab following an attempted suicide. The bandages taped across his wrists as he held up his big catch were unmistakable, even from the shore from where the picture was taken. His dark glasses, which for once seemed to fit the occasion, covered the pain Paul was so used to seeing in his father's eyes. Everyone around looked genuinely happy; even Stephen forced an uncharacteristic smile for the picture. The fish, still dripping wet, appeared to wriggle with life as it dangled on the fishing line. The drips formed small ripples in the water in front of the boat.

*That's odd. If this is a picture, why does everything feel...alive?* He clenched his fist and opened it to reveal not a picture but a handful of muddy grass. A soft breeze blew through his hair, sending chills down his spine. *Is this real? Could I actually be here?*

Paul quickly shook aside the notion as completely and utterly preposterous. *I am in the attic, and this is a photo.* He looked down at what he kept telling himself was the attic floor. *And this is definitely grass.* He grabbed another handful of earth and flung it into the air, mostly because he did not know what else to do.

"You caught yourself a nice, big one, Stephen," a man in the boat said. In his excitement and disbelief, Paul had forgotten that he was not alone. From his position on the bank, he could overhear the conversation, although the dense shrubbery shielded him from their sight.

"Sure feels heavy," Paul heard his father respond. It was the first time in over seven months he had heard his father's voice. It had an unusually calming effect on Paul's nerves. He wanted to call out to his father but something inside stopped him. Instead, Paul just watched his father with longing, unsure of what to do with himself.

"Well we got a good picture of it," the man who had snapped the photo announced. "You'll have to show it to Marian and Paul."

Paul perked up at the sound of his name. He almost raised his hand to indicate that he was present.

Stephen's brief smile faded. "Yeah, we never really do any of this stuff together..." His words trailed off. "I don't think Paul is in to fishing all that much." Paul could tell his father was lying; he had never once invited him on a fishing trip, let alone mentioned going on one.

"I'm sure he'd appreciate it all the same," offered the other man in the boat. "Y'all wanna call it a day?"

"Sure thing, Donny," said the man on shore. Stephen merely nodded, his face still void of emotion. They began rowing the boat towards the bank.

Paul shifted his position in the bushes. If he was going to try and make contact with his father, he would have to act now. He watched as the three men secured the boat to the dock and turned to grab their fishing gear. They then stepped onto the dock and walked over to their truck to toss the gear in the back. In one motion, Paul stood



up and took a step to the edge of the tree line. *Snap!* A twig cracked beneath his foot, startling Donny as he opened the driver-side door. Paul dropped to the ground behind some foliage, his heart pounding against his chest.

"What was that, Don?" Stephen said.

"I thought I saw your –" He stopped, peering into the bushes. "Ah, never mind. It was nothing. You guys all set?" Donny closed the door and turned the ignition.

Paul heaved a huge sigh as he closed his eyes and shook his head. He looked up over the bushes to make sure they were gone, but all he saw were piles of crudely labeled boxes.

*Could it be?* Paul's mind was reeling. *Was it all just a dream?* Confusion filled his head as he attempted to get his bearings. He was in the attic. Had he ever left? *It was just another dream, right? Wouldn't be surprised – I've had plenty of those.* He stopped. *But this one felt so...so, well, real.*

"Paulie! What's taking you so long, hun? Is everything okay?"

The words of Paul's mother echoed up the staircase from the kitchen one floor below. At the same instant her shrill voice reached his ears, Paul quickly shut the shoebox out of impulse and shoved it back into the corner.

"Coming, Mom," Paul shouted back as nonchalantly as he could. It would be difficult to hide his flustered state from his mother; she had always been perceptive of his true emotions. He hurriedly located the boxes of holiday decorations and, with cautious steps, turned off the light on his way downstairs.

His mother was waiting for him with outstretched arms.

"There you are," she said with a smile. "You're killing me, taking so long up there." Paul watched as she snatched the boxes from his hands. "I have presents to wrap, pies to bake – no time to dilly-dally."

"Yeah, sorry, I – I got distracted," he said as he burned a hole in the hardwood floor with a downtrodden stare.

"Well help me with these decorations, Paulie. Now, I'll hang up the stockings while you take the wreath outside, and then I'll hand you one end of the garland so we can string it across the room." After hearing no response, she snapped her fingers in front of Paul's face.

"Ya listening to me, hun?"

Paul nodded slowly. As he fumbled for the wreath, he could faintly hear his mother talking about some dinner plans with the neighbors the following night. However, his mind was still fixated on his dream...if that was what it was. He could not be sure of anything at this point, not with such vivid images fresh in his mind. *It wasn't like the other dreams. Those were all centered around death, but this one was brimming with life – life I never actually experienced.*

"Paul, what's the matter?" asked his mother, who was suddenly standing right in front of him.

"Sorry, Mom, I can't do this right now," he responded. "I'm not feeling well..."

"You want me to take your temperature? Let me make you some chicken soup."



But Paul had already turned towards the hallway. "I think I'm just going to go to bed."

"Alright, hun," said his mother. She heard his door close from down the hall but called out a "Sweet dreams" anyway.

Paul collapsed onto his bed, thoughts racing. *Dream or not, I was there. I was crouching on the bank of the water; I could feel the grass in the palm of my hand; I could hear my father's voice. And they felt my presence as much as I felt theirs – they turned when they heard me in the forest.* Paul reached his hands up to his face to rub his eyes. *So if that was really happening, that means I was actually, physically, there.*

As he ran his hands down his face in exhaustion, Paul felt something coarse rubbing against his skin. He held his hand out into the sliver of moonlight streaming through his window. *Dirt?* Paul thought. *Where did that come from?*



*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

The oven timer in the Barnes kitchen sounded with a monotonous consistency unbecoming the household.

"Paulie! The pies are done!"

Marian Barnes' shouts were ignored by Paul, who was in his bedroom busy dressing for their dinner party. He looked into his mirror with a disapproving glance at the lavender dress shirt. Paul's best efforts to make the occasion casual by wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt had been thwarted by his mother's insistence on proper attire. He sighed and continued buttoning up his shirt.

Paul's mother, however, had been rushing around all day in preparation for the evening. *Why the big deal about the dinner party? They're just our neighbors. We see them every year for this night – would it really hurt to skip one? Plus, this will be the first without Dad, and he's the reason we moved in next door to them in the first place.*

Another look into the mirror told Paul everything he needed to know. *Yep, it's gonna be a miserable night.* He ran his fingers through his hair – his way of styling it – before heading downstairs.

"Oh, you look so handsome, just like your father when he was your age," his mother gushed. Paul just rolled his eyes. They each grabbed a covered dish and stepped out into the cold winter air.

Paul looked up at his neighbors' house as they cut through the grass to the front steps. The place was once like a second home for Paul, but he had not been over to visit for months. It reminded him too much of his father. And for good reason; his father spent more time in that house than he did in his own. Ever since The Incident, Stephen Barnes and Samuel Walden had been all but inseparable. They used to always joke about how they would one day live next to each other in a quiet, suburban neighborhood, which would always elicit a laugh from Marian. However, when the opportunity presented itself seventeen years ago, both men knew they could not pass it



up. *Interesting to look back on it now. It's the only thing that ever went right in the second half of my father's life.*

"Well if it isn't my two favorite neighbors!" Sam Walden followed his greeting with a hearty chuckle. "Come on in! You're probably freezing your bums out there!"

"Hello, Sammy!" Marian said. "Something inside smells wonderful!"

"That's Laura; she's in the kitchen," Sam responded. "And I bet the food smells good, too!"

Marian let out an uncontrollable giggle at the joke. Paul, meanwhile, politely cracked a smile and nodded at Sam as they entered the Walden house. He carried the pies down the hall into the dining room and set them on the table before going back to take the other dish from his mother.

"Here Mom, let me get that for you," he said, grabbing the green bean casserole she had in her arms. Paul turned and walked back down the hall, this time looking up to notice the picture collages lining the walls. The Waldens were a photogenic couple, especially next to Paul and his parents. Most of the pictures were of the families together, vacationing or attending community gatherings. Since Sam and Laura never had any children, most of the families' get-togethers functioned like a double date, with Paul being the fifth wheel. Paul did not mind; he preferred his solitude, and he was sure that he would have just ended up babysitting the Waldens' kids if they had any.

One picture in particular caught his eye as he scanned the wall. It was of him and his father standing in the driveway on a snowy day after shoveling the sidewalk. He must have been about six years old at the time, complete with chubby face and bowl-cut. Stephen Barnes was standing with his arm around his son and an honest smile on his face – something that had rarely been documented in family photos. Their coats were covered with snow, which drifted around them. Paul and his father held out their arms as the wind blew blankets of swirling snow all around them. It stuck to their faces momentarily before melting and running down their cheeks.

As he observed the scene, Paul shivered and let out a breath of cold air, which he could see in front of him. It was then that he realized where he was – behind a pile of snow in his front yard. Standing slightly to his left, nearly ten feet away, he beheld the most astonishing sight: six-year-old Paul Barnes was playing happily in the snow with his father. Directly to his right stood his mother, smiling and holding the camera. Paul could feel chills down his spine, and despite the frigid weather, he knew they were not caused by the cold.

*That's me. I don't know how...and I don't know why...but that is me.*

"Daddy, I'm making a snow angel!" he heard his younger self say. It was like listening to a familiar voice he'd known his whole life for the first time.

"Is it a big one, Paul?"

"Yeah! It's as big as me!"

His father let out a laugh as he plopped down next to his six-year-old son in the snow. Tears began to well up in Paul's eyes. *Dad...I forgot what it was like to hear your laugh. You really did care about me, and all I brought you was misery.* His knees nearly buckled in his sorrow as feelings of longing resurfaced after years of repression. *I miss*



*hearing you laugh, Dad...I miss being with you.* Paul's tears gave way to sobs. *I miss...you...*

Six-year-old Paul was now laughing too as he threw a handful of snow at his father. It was too much for his older self, who buried his face into his palms. *I wish I had taken more time to get to know you, Dad! I wish I had known you before all of this – before it was too late. Before...the pain...*

He uncovered his eyes just in time to see the casserole he had been holding falling to the ground. The seconds that followed felt as if they were moving in slow motion. Paul stood paralyzed as the glass dish hit the linoleum tile, shattering into pieces and scattering green bean casserole all across the floor. He remained frozen in place despite the shouts of concern coming from the next room.

Laura was the first to the scene and immediately dropped to her knees to pick up the broken glass. Marian arrived one second later, grabbing Paul's shaking shoulders from behind.

"Paulie, are you okay? What happened?"

But Paul was far beyond consolation. He shook off his mother's hands and ran towards the front door, tears still streaming down his frostbitten cheeks. Paul did not hear them calling after him; he could not hear anything except the echoes of his father's laugh, still ringing in his ears. He did not know where he was going, other than away from where he was at that moment. What was real no longer mattered, only what he felt. His thoughts were singularly on his father. *I need you, dad – I need you now more than ever. And I'm not ready to say goodbye...*

Paul sprinted up the attic stairs. He did not remember running from the neighbor's house to his or how much time had passed in between. All he knew was that he was in the attic. *I don't know how I got up here. Yet, somehow, it feels like this is where I'm supposed to be.*

He took no time to catch his breath, but instead went directly to the old shoebox he had found the day before. Paul began rapidly flipping through the photos of his father in search of just the right one without knowing what it might be. He grabbed a photo, held it up in front of his eyes, and stared violently at it, waiting for something – anything – to happen. Nothing. Again, this time squinting and trying to will himself into the memory. Still nothing. Paul crumpled up the picture and threw it at the attic wall in frustration.

*Dad, where are you?* He poured over the pile of remaining photos, pausing more than a few times in hopes of a sign. Whatever he was looking for was not there. Paul stood up, threw the photos back into the box, and kicked it with all his rage. The flimsy old cardboard tore apart, spilling his father's life all over the floor. The lid of the box flew into the air, flipped over, and fell back down right at Paul's feet.

Paul blinked. On the inside of the lid, stuck to the tape that had been applied a few years back to hold the box together, was a photo of Stephen Barnes from his college years. He was standing in the doorway of his dormitory, striking his best James Dean pose. There were stacked boxes on a dolly behind him, evidence that the picture was taken on move-in day. Stephen was grinning from head to toe.

*I miss him, even if I didn't really know him. I just wish somehow I could go back and fix things. He seems so happy here. This was his life before me. Oh what I'd do to have another chance, to see him as he once was.*

The more Paul stared at the picture, the more at ease he felt. He glanced to either side, took a deep breath, and began walking towards the dormitory entrance, towards his father.



## Chapter 2



The aroma of fire-grilled bratwursts and hamburgers wafted through the air and into Paul Barnes' nostrils. The opening day of college football season across the country meant that students and alumni alike flooded every campus parking for pregame tailgate parties. Flags snapped in the wind as throngs of people decked out in maroon and gold migrated to the nearest vehicle. This was Stephen Barnes' campus.

Meanwhile, freshmen were loading and unloading carts with all their essentials for the next nine months. It would still be a matter of hours before their first all-important social experience, where thousands of strangers would be united to cheer for a team they knew little about. The bonds created tonight could very well define the next four years of each student's life. This thought weighed heavily as Paul took a nervous step towards his father.

*This is it.* He was now only a few feet away from a young and vibrant Stephen Barnes. *What do I say? What should I do? How do I introduce myself to someone I've known for twenty-odd years?* Paul hoped for the best and extended his uneasy hand for a shake.

"Hey man, are you moving in to room 312?" The voice had come from a tall, thin man with curly blonde hair.

"Yeah, how did you know?" Stephen responded.

"Name's Karl - I'm your roommate. I recognized you from orientation this summer." He looked at Stephen's dolly, overflowing with boxes and bags. "You need any help with your stuff? I'm already unpacked upstairs."

That was the last thing Paul heard; he had already turned away and was trying to look busy. *Well, that didn't work.* He realized that he was standing next to a bush and stroking it with his palm, as if to measure its uniformity. *And I'm still no good at this whole looking nonchalant thing.* It was becoming increasingly clear to Paul that he was going to have to learn how to fit in if he wanted to get to know his father. More importantly, when he finally worked up the courage to approach Stephen Barnes, Paul would have to do his best impression of a normal, healthy human being - not one who just travelled twenty years into the past to meet his father.

*Am I really here? I mean, really, actually here - at college with Dad?* The feeling of reality was unmistakable for Paul. *I can't just be revisiting a memory, like I was with Dad in the snow. This happened before I ever knew him - from before I was even born! I can't revisit a place I've never been to, let alone a time I've never experienced.*

Rather than standing awkwardly amidst the landscaping, Paul thought it best to take a tour of the dorm in which his father would be living. He contemplated waiting for him near his room, but decided against any potentially uncomfortable confrontation. *What am I doing? This is never going to work!* His frustration built as he turned and burst through the double doors leading into the dormitory lobby. He looked around at the

disarray pouring out of the hallways and into the foyer. Mini refrigerators, old couches, and jumbled masses of suitcases and boxes lay strewn across the floor, waiting for their owners to walk by and drag them into their tightly packed concrete cells. As overwhelming as the experience was for the new students, it was even more stressful for Paul, who grappled for answers as he waded through the disorder.

Paul's musings, however, soon turned worrisome. *But how long do I have here?* He could not avoid the thought that his previous two trips through time each lasted a matter of minutes. There was no way to calculate – or even speculate, for that matter – the length of his stay or the probability that he would ever return to this place and time. *Whatever strange phenomena got me to this point, I may never understand,* thought Paul. *But if I ever want to get to know the true Stephen Barnes, this is my chance.* His thoughts became clearer and grew in confidence as he located the staircase. *And that's why I am here! That's why I have been brought back to this time. That's why – somehow – I was meant to find that photo.*

Paul looked down at his feet just in time to realize he had rounded the final corner of the staircase and was about to emerge onto the third floor of the building. Room 312, repeated Paul in his mind. He let out a long, slow breath as he opened the door to Floor 3.

Paul's determined steps took him directly into the path of an unsuspecting student walking in the opposite direction.

"Oh, sorry, man; didn't see you there," was Paul's natural response. In his haste, he had accidentally knocked a folder from the hands of the student, who had not noticed but instead continued on his way. Paul reached down to pick up the folder, which had a neatly-printed label adhered to the top right corner. With wide eyes, Paul read the name printed on the label.

*Stephen Barnes.*

"Hey, you dropped your folder!" Paul shouted after Stephen, who was half way down the hall by this point. Paul could see his father stop and turn back towards him with a questioning look on his face.

"You Stephen Barnes?"

"Yeah," said Stephen as he began walking towards his son. Paul had felt slightly uncomfortable shouting his father's name out loud – he had always been Dad to him. But he was going to have to get used to it. Plus, he already had the initial exchange out of the way, and without expecting it or having time to worry about how to go about it. Paul's self-assurance was rising as he took a step towards Stephen.

"Thanks, man," Stephen said, extending his hand to accept the folder from Paul.

Paul shrugged. "Well, it's the least I could do, after running into you like that."

"Yeah, you got me pretty good," laughed Stephen. "I would've stopped but I was totally in the zone – they've got free pizza in the study lounge at the end of the hall. You coming to the game?"

"Uhh, sure," responded Paul, trying to get the hang of just stepping back and letting the whole thing run its course.



"I'm Stephen, but I guess you already knew that," his father said with a smile, nodding down at his folder.

"Ha, yeah, I managed to catch that." Paul gulped. "I'm Paul. Paul Ba—" He barely caught himself from what could have been either a disastrous mistake or an enormous coincidence, and he did not feel like finding out which.

"Nice to meet you, Paul Bah!" Stephen said as the two began walking towards the study lounge. "By the way, me and some other guys from the floor are gonna be playing some football tomorrow afternoon, and judging from the way you almost took me out, we could use a big hitter like you!"

"Count me in!" Paul shot back. *Hey, this isn't so bad. This isn't bad at all!* The truth was, Paul was already enjoying himself immensely. And for the first time in a long time, he felt truly welcome by his father.



"Alright, zoom red left slot, 325 'Z' Omaha! On three!"

Blank faces filled the huddle.

"Just...you go out, and you block for me. And *you* go deep, Paul."

Paul had his instructions. He may not be a football expert – like Adam, the former high school quarterback – but he knew how to go deep, especially against this coverage. Paul strutted over to his spot on the right side and lined up facing the defender he had been torching all day: Stephen Barnes.

"You want some more of this?" Paul gloated in his father's face.

"Keep bringing your stuff my way and we'll see what happens," was Stephen's cocky, cool reply.

Paul gave Stephen an arrogant look. "C'mon, we both know what happened last time you tried to guard me."

It was beginning to get difficult to remember the last time for Stephen, or at least to differentiate the last time from all the others. School had been in session for a full two weeks, and half a dozen games of pick-up football had already taken place in this very field. While Stephen had the advantage of knowing a few of the guys from high school, Paul was gifted with a natural athletic ability, which he had not hesitated to put on full display. He had quickly gained the reputation as the speedster of the group, always a threat to go deep and make a big play. And this day, just like all the others, Stephen was doing his best just to slow him down.

"Omaha! Omaha!" Adam crouched below center, barking out signals which went ignored by everyone else on the field. No one knew what they meant, and more importantly, no one cared. They had come to accept the fact that Adam was using these games to relive – perhaps even rewrite – his high school playing days, and that calling plays and signals were a natural byproduct of this drive.

"You know I'm going deep, right?" Paul said to Stephen with a smile.

"No you're not," Stephen said. "You wouldn't tell me if you were."



Paul laughed. "Unless I knew that you couldn't stop me, even if you knew exactly what I was going to do."

Stephen could only shake his head in exasperation. He did not know much about Paul or his personal life. What dorm he lived in, what classes he took, and where he was from were all mysteries. All he knew was that this kid seemed to always show up on his floor, ready to play anything or go anywhere with Stephen and his group of friends. He liked Paul, there was no doubt about it. He had a certain eagerness about him, like he needed to pack as much as possible into each and every day. Yes, there was definitely something about Paul, and maybe someday he would know just what it was.

"Hut! Hut hut!"

The ball was hiked to Adam, and in a flash, Stephen saw Paul's shape take one step to the right before blurring past his left shoulder. Adam saw it, too, and after eluding a would-be tackler, lofted a pass deep to the back right corner of the endzone for Paul. Stephen could only watch from several paces back as Paul flew into the air to make the grab.

"Touchdown!" yelled Adam. "6-for-6 and two scores, baby! Can they stop me?"

Paul silently extended his fist towards the sky and trotted back into the field of play. He had never been used to this kind of attention before, but he had to admit that he was loving it. In high school, Paul never had this chance to shine - not only athletically, but socially as well. He had gotten used to the role of outcast, more out of necessity than of want. Paul had just assumed that was the way of things when he went off to college and did not make any sort of effort to break the mold. But this? This was something new, something completely different from anything he had experienced before. Adam might have been the one reliving his high school days, but Paul was living an entirely new life, one with desire and excitement. One with Stephen Barnes.

"I tried to warn you..." Paul trailed off as he jogged past Stephen.

"Yeah, yeah," Stephen chuckled, "another highlight reel for Paul. Guess I should try giving you more of a bump at the line."

That would be easier said than done for Stephen, considering Paul's improving shape. It had only been a few weeks, but Paul was already engaging in more physical activity than he had in the last several months combined. His endurance was increasing, and that was not the only change going on. Paul had not shaved since arriving on campus and had the makings of a crude beard forming on his face. In fact, as far as personal hygiene was going, Paul had been forced to be a little lax. He had limited resources to use and limited access to the facilities on campus. For the last two weeks, it had been a job just finding times and places he could use for washing. He had luckily wandered into the basement of Stephen's dorm the first night and found a couch to crash on, but much like his stay in the past, Paul did not know how long this gift would last. He was living day-to-day, but he enjoyed every minute of it.

Adam held his hand up signaling Paul to toss him the football. "I don't know about you all but I'm hungry. Who's up for some din?"



Stephen, Paul, and the rest of the guys followed Adam doggedly off the dry dust-covered field and towards the parking lots. They managed to pile everyone into three vehicles for the short drive over to the dining halls. Everyone smelled like sweaty underwear after hours of football, but most of the food courts were a little musty anyway. Paul walked up next to Stephen as they entered the dining hall and put his arm around Stephen's shoulders.

"Hey, you think you could – you know – spot me some cash for dinner? I'm running a little short this week. I'll pay you back as soon as I get paid." As true as Paul wanted his last statement to be, he had no clue how he was going to start coming up with money. Paul had been rationing the thirty some odd dollars he had fortunately tucked away in his wallet from his past – or future – life. *Thank God for inflation.* Thirty dollars barely got Paul through one week in the present, let alone close to three. Of course, he did not anticipate being stuck for this long, and there was no telling how much longer he would remain. *Maybe I'll be stuck here forever. That wouldn't be so bad, but I sure as Hell can't keep this up without an income.* He was now down to less than five dollars, and he was tired of skipping breakfast and mooching snacks off of his buddies.

"Well," Stephen hesitated, "I guess I *could* buy you dinner just this once. After all, you did totally torch me on that last play."

"Thanks Steve, you're a lifesaver. I owe you one."

"You owe me more than one, Paulie boy. I've seen the way you been putting away my chips and soda." Stephen laughed.

They all sat down at a dimly lit booth with trays of greasy burgers and cheese-covered fries. The college freshman diet might eventually catch up with them, but they had the rest of their lives to worry about it. Besides, they had just finished playing an exhausting game of football – that had to count for something. And these burger and fries post-game meals were starting to become somewhat of a tradition.

As Paul shoved each dripping fry into his mouth, he was once again filled with a feeling of comfort and ease. He joined in the conversation along with Stephen and the others without any reservations; Paul even brought up a few topics of his own. Within a half hour, he learned everything he ever needed to know about the favorites to win the Heisman Trophy this year, the best new games for Nintendo, and the cute girl who lived down the hall from Adam. He did not even notice as the group of guys began to disperse, one by one, to go off and do their own things that night. Suddenly, Paul looked up from the crumbs he had been rearranging for the last hour to see only Stephen remaining on the other side of the table.

"Wow, where did everyone else go?"

Stephen shook his head. "It's Friday night, silly," he responded. "People have plans, things to do, places to be...people to see."

Paul dreaded where this was going. He had never had much success dating – *if you could even consider those dates*, he thought. *The only reason she agreed to go out to dinner was because she got me confused with the other Paul in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.* He decided to go on the offensive before being forced to answer a question he preferred to avoid.



"So...do you have anyone to, you know, go see tonight?" Paul asked, trying to make it obvious what he was talking about without actually talking about it.

"Not tonight," came the quick and downtrodden response from Stephen. "Unless you got a plane ticket on you that you don't need."

"Where does she live?"

Stephen made an exaggerated motion with his arm. "Waaay over on the west coast. I haven't seen her in almost a month now. She's from my hometown. Her name's Marian."

Paul had to put forth a concerted effort not to drop his jaw at the sound of his mother's name. He had gotten so caught up in the moment that he had forgotten who he was talking to – and who he was talking about. It was hard for Paul to imagine someone with whom he had lived his entire life residing halfway across the country. However, he suppressed these initial emotions and continued the conversation.

"Oh yeah? What's she like?"

"She's everything to me. She's all I've been able to think about for years now. I mean, I know we're still young, but I would be ready to marry her if we weren't so far apart. Most of the guys, they aren't even looking for anything serious. That's what makes me different, I guess. You know what I mean?"

Paul did not know what he meant, having never been close to anyone in his life, but he nodded his head in understanding.

Stephen continued. "This is the longest I've gone without seeing her. You would love her, Paul. She's like you in some ways. I can't really put words to it. I just have this feeling you guys would get along well. She's coming back for a visit next month. You'll see what I mean then."

All this talk about Paul's mother made him miss her terribly. He had never gone this long without seeing her either, and he was starting to wonder when and if he would ever see her again. Paul held back a throbbing lump that was building in his throat as he stared down at his empty tray.

All this time he was getting to know his father, he had forgotten about the people he left behind. *What must they be thinking right now? Are they even aware of what's going on? Why can't you be here when I need you the most, Mom? I can't do this all alone, without you. This isn't right – this isn't my life!*

What Paul now wanted more than anything was to go home. He was tired of sleeping on a couch in a cold basement, tired of skimping on meals, tired of pretending to be someone he was not. He had no past here, no future – only now. Paul knew he could not keep up the charade forever. Stephen would start to ask questions, and he would not have the answers. At least not any Stephen would understand. A tear unwittingly rolled down Paul's cheek.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I've just been missing home. Do you ever wonder if you were never supposed to come here, like you're missing out on something somewhere else?"

Stephen looked him dead in the eye and said, "Every day."

They gazed off for what seemed like an hour, each of them thinking about what their lives could be, should be. Both longed for something they could not have, something just beyond their reach.

Paul was the first one to stand up with his tray. They both left the dining hall and stepped out into the lamplight outside. The sky had grown dark and cloudy since they first entered the building. Cold and rainy weather greeted Paul and Stephen as they walked side by side down the sidewalk leading to the parking lot.

"I hate driving in the rain," said Stephen, slamming the driver's side car door shut in disgust. "Let's just get back to the dorm as fast as we can."

Paul simply nodded as he buckled himself in, eyes focused through the car window and on the slick roads outside. With a screech, the car flew out of the parking lot and into the street.



## Chapter 3



There was only so much the windshield wipers on Stephen's car could do to keep up with the relentless downpour. Paul could not remember the last time it had rained this hard, let alone the last time the weather had changed so unexpectedly. A few hours earlier, he and the other guys had been tossing a football around on a dry, firm field while the sun began to set on a warm fall afternoon. Now he had to squint through the rain just to distinguish the road in front of him from the dark and cloudy horizon.

"How far is it back to the dorm?" asked Paul, nearly shouting, as if he could lessen the force of the rain by drowning out its noise.

"Not far," Stephen said. "Just down to the end of this street, around the corner, and then two more blocks east." He turned to face Paul. "Shouldn't you be figuring out your way around campus by now? I mean, we've been going to class for a few weeks."

Paul answered sheepishly without meeting Stephen's eyes. He was getting tired of telling lies and dancing around the truth. "Yeah, I guess I've just had more important things on my mind." *Well that wasn't a lie, at least,* Paul thought.

"I must have taken this route at least ten times already," continued Stephen. "Of course, when you're walking it, you can't do any sweet turns around the corners...like this!"

Paul's insides lurched as Stephen violently jerked the wheel to the left. Meanwhile, the sound of the rain against the windows was completely covered by Stephen's child-like laughter. *Where is this coming from? I knew my dad used to laugh more, but I never pegged him as a crazy driver! Even before his blindness, I figured he would be ultra-conservative on the road, just like he is in every other area of his life.*

As Paul's fingers dug deeper into the rubber siding on the passenger-side door, the car finally finished its slide and straightened itself out. Stephen let out a whoop in triumph.

"Was that sick or *what?!?* Man, forget what I said about driving in the rain - I gotta do this more often!"

He took his hands off the wheel to extend them towards Paul, waiting for a high-five in return. But Paul's insides, which had just recovered from his father's exploits, turned upside-down when he glanced forward. Barely visible through the rain but quickly approaching was a pair of headlights, headed directly towards them.

"What is it?" Stephen said upon seeing Paul's face go deathly white. He followed Paul's eyes forward just in time to see the headlights grow to an enormous size.

There was little time for either Paul or Stephen to react. Stephen was frozen in place, arms still hanging in the air. Paul threw his hands wildly towards the wheel, striking it on the right side and sending it spinning left. Both felt the car suddenly careen to its left just moments before the impact came.

Several things happened in the moments that followed, none of which could be recalled by Stephen or Paul. They did not remember the car's motion coming to an abrupt halt when colliding with the oncoming vehicle. They did not remember the front passenger side of Stephen's car being crushed like an aluminum can by the bigger, stronger truck. They did not remember the window shattering and the hundreds of tiny glass shards that flew into Stephen's face. They did not remember any of this – just cold, bleak darkness. And silence.



*Uhhhh...*

*What happened?*

Paul tried to open his eyes. Everything was hazy – like a dream. More like a nightmare. *Where's Stephen! Oh my God, what happened!* He tried to scream, but all that came out was a faint whisper. "Stephen." Blood spewed out as Paul coughed. *I have to move, have to make sure Dad's okay!* As his vision became clearer, Paul could see nothing but flashing lights and twisted metal. The interior of the car was no longer recognizable. Another vehicle's bumper was protruding into the passenger side, pinning Paul's lower half against the seat. Paul was lying on his side facing the dashboard, which was covered in broken glass.

*I can't move my neck,* Paul thought as he lay there paralyzed. His lips moved once more to call out for his dad, letting warm blood pour out of his mouth and down his cheek. Stephen was only inches away from Paul, his head bludgeoned into the cracked driver side window. He didn't move.

"Dad." He spoke softly, but clearly all the same.

"Is that you, Paul? I can't see you..."

Paul gasped for air, choking on his own blood. He could tell from his father's voice that he was in considerable pain. "Yeah – yeah it's me."

"Ahhh, my eyes!" moaned Stephen. It was probably a good thing that Paul couldn't turn to see all the shards of glass lodged into Stephen's eye sockets. "I can't see a thing! Where's the other car?"

"It's right here."

"Are you ok? Are you hurt?"

"I can't – move. Can't – feel legs."

"Don't say that, man. You're hurt, but you're alright. You're alive. I can already hear the ambulances coming to get us. We'll take a ride to the hospital, miss a few days of class, that's all." He paused to take a breath, hoping and praying that his words were more than just empty promises. "God, my face is killing me!"



Stephen was moaning in pain. His face was drenched. Nothing but bloody glass shards jutted out in every angle. The rest of his body was scratched up, but his head took the brunt of the impact. His temple still pressed hard against the window.

"I can't see anything through all this blood. Why aren't the ambulances here yet? I can hear them."

But Paul could no longer hear the sirens in the distance. In fact, the sound of Stephen's voice was also slowly diminishing in his ears. Paul was beginning to lose control of his senses as he lay pinned between the back of his seat and the hood of the other vehicle.

*This is it. This is actually it.* The very thought sent chills down Paul's spine. *I am going to die here.*

Paul's weary mind began racing with memories of his old life – the one he was supposed to be living back in the present. *What will happen to Mom? What will happen to me? Will I return to that life, where I belong? If I don't return, will everything keep going on there without me? Or have I created something else, something entirely new and different than my life before? Have I made this reality my real life?* All he knew was he had spent his final few weeks with his father, the real Stephen Barnes, the one he otherwise never would have known.

Then it started making sense. *Of course I had to swerve the car to the left. Of course I had to take the full force of the car's impact. I had to protect Dad's life; I couldn't exist without him. I never would have existed without him. If he dies now...I never exist in any time.*

Paul lay there helpless, his thoughts quietly slipping into the vast expanse of eternity. He lost all feeling, all sensation. Stephen was now screaming in pain, but his cries fell upon deaf ears. There was nothing left of Paul but a mutilated body, his pale cold eyes staring lifelessly at the dashboard.

Squad cars and ambulances arrived on the scene soon afterward. Stephen did not hear about Paul's death or the death of the other driver until the next day. The surgeons had worked tirelessly the night before pulling shrapnel out of Stephen's face and eyes, using every medical technique possible to stop the bleeding. By the morning they had his face almost entirely covered in bandages. Only his mouth was left exposed, but even that opening had several tubes lodged into it for breathing purposes. He suffered several broken ribs and some deep bruising in his arms and back, but these injuries were minor compared to the inflictions he suffered above the neck. Multiple concussions and severe temporal lobe damage only added to the doctors' difficulties in tending to his wounds. Nonetheless, by the next morning he was conscious, though he could not speak.

Stephen slowly became aware of his surroundings as he lay in the hospital bed. The commotion that had been going on around him had subsided; he only heard one pair of footsteps to his right, close to the large machine he was hooked into. *Probably just a nurse – I must be doing alright*, he thought. He blinked. *Wait a second...why can't I see anything?* Stephen had not realized that he had been relying on solely sound and touch up to this point.



"Hey, buddy, you sure got into a nasty wreck yesterday." The voice was coming from the same direction as the footsteps Stephen had heard moments earlier. "You're awful lucky to be alive."

Stephen let a few seconds of silence provide his detached response.

"I'm Sammy - I was the EMT that pulled you out of that car. I don't know how to say this, but...well, you're my first car accident victim, and I wanted to check in on you."

A feeling of warmth swept over Stephen. Even though he could not talk, Stephen tried his best to express his heartfelt appreciation. He gently lifted his right arm into the air and gave his new friend a thumbs-up.

Samuel Walden reached over and grabbed Stephen's hand in a handshake. "They got you bandaged up real good, huh?"

*That was it - the bandages!* Stephen finally realized why he had not been able to see this whole time. *What a relief! I'll be able to see again as soon as they get this stupid cloth off of my face.*

Stephen felt Sammy let his hand go as he began to back away. "I'll be busy with classes most of this week, but I'm sure I'll see you again before you get out of here." He cracked a grin that Stephen could almost feel, even without his vision. "So don't you go gettin' better on me too fast now!"

As much as he wanted to get better and out of that hospital bed, Stephen was no longer sure from where the feeling of anxiousness was coming. *Why do I even want to go? Someone who I've never said a word to is the only person who cares enough to visit me. Besides, I won't be able to concentrate on school after this. I've lost a good friend in Paul, and what's worse, it was all my fault. I should've been the one to die in that crash. He only knew me for two weeks, and yet he willingly risked his life to protect me. If only you knew what it was going to cost you, Paul - maybe you did. You took the full force of that impact so I didn't have to.*

He wanted so badly to cry, to mourn over the loss of one of his best friends, but the pain would not let him. Instead, Stephen clenched his fist and pounded on his bed, softly at first, but then more and more vehemently as his agony overtook him. When his thrashing became too violent, the nurses came in to restrain him. He could not think of any other way to express himself, but Stephen's movements were dangerous for the bandages and tubes. They gave him a shot of morphine, and he gradually drifted off to sleep.

Stephen awoke to the sound of a soft and beautiful voice.

"Hi, baby."

*Could it be?* Stephen thought. He knew in an instant it could only be Marian's voice and her soft touch against his arm. Stephen's heart skipped a beat. *How long have I been sleeping?*

"The doctors say you've been out of it for two whole days," said Marian as if she knew his thoughts. "I came as quickly as I could, hun. Daddy said he'd take care of the ticket, and I hopped on the first plane here. I'll be here as long as you need me - already cleared it with my profs."



Marian was clearly anxious. She unconsciously began digging her fingers into Stephen's arm. By now, the doctors had taken the tubes out of his mouth and he was almost able to speak clearly. Stephen's voice cracked from his parched throat.

"Marian, it's so good to see you, baby. I thought no one would be here to see me. I - I don't know what's wrong with me..." His voice began to fail as he struggled to form words for the first time in days.

"It's okay, hun; you don't have to talk if it hurts too much," Marian said with understanding in her voice.

Stephen paused briefly before beginning to speak again. "They won't tell me everything that's going on - I can tell. I haven't been able to take these bandages off for days now."

Marian bit her fist as she looked upon his mummified face. She knew something was not right, but she could not bring herself to say anything to Stephen about it.

"There was a man in here earlier, wanted to see you. He told me to let you know that he would be back by this evening. What was his name - Sam - that's it. Sam Walden. Said he was your paramedic or something."

"Yes, he came to me the other day, wanted to introduce himself. He's the only person who's talked to me that wasn't a doctor or a nurse. Marian, I've felt so alone since the wreck. It was my fault. I killed those people, I killed Paul."

"Who's Paul?"

"He's the one who really saved my life. Paul was a great friend of mine - I wanted you to meet him so bad. He was in the passenger seat that night. If it weren't for him, I would've - died too. Instead, I'm the one who's alive. I'm a murderer."

"Stephen, don't talk like that. It was an accident, nothing more. You are not responsible for anyone's death."

"You don't understand, Mare, you weren't there! I saw it all happen right in front of my eyes! It was my fault for driving so recklessly. I saw Paul turn the wheel so I would avoid the collision! It's like he somehow knew...and I let it happen!"

But all Stephen heard in response was the soft sobs of Marian. She could not take any more of this - no, not with what she knew. Marian choked back the tears and spoke to Stephen with a quivering voice.

"They told me, Stephen. They told me what they haven't told you yet - the damage to your eyes was worse than you think. There's a good chance it's permanent, too." She could not help but let a soft whimper escape her throat. "Stephen...they said you might never see again."

All Stephen could do was lie in his bed, incredulous and powerless. His frustration at the death and the suffering he had caused was gone, that was for sure - his mind would not let him dwell on that anymore. He wanted so badly to cry; he wanted more than anything to let the pain rush in and overtake him, but he could not. It was as if someone had simply turned off his ability to cry.

Marian's sobs returned as she rested her head on Stephen's chest. She gripped him as tightly as she could, like she was trying to squeeze out any drips of emotion that he may have left inside. Nothing. Stephen was utterly and irrefutably empty.





"Honey, I'm home!"

Marian's voice rang through the apartment like a breath of fresh air. At least, that is how Stephen saw it, and he sat up in his chair to turn down the music.

"Hi honey, how was class?"

"Oh, alright I guess." She hung up her coat in the closet before turning back towards Stephen. "I thought about you a lot today."

Stephen wanted to take it as a compliment, but he knew it was only understandable. Ever since she had gone into occupational therapy following his accident, she had been picking up on different ways to make life easier for them back at home. It was something they both knew was much-needed; Stephen and Marian thought things would be better after their wedding three months ago, but that had only brought on a new batch of issues to deal with. How to arrange all their furniture and organize their closets in the most unobtrusive manner only began to cover the challenges they faced every day. Now, with a child on the way, a fresh batch of questions awaited the newlyweds just around the corner.

"I thought about you a lot today, too," offered Stephen as Marian put her arm around him. "And I thought about you, too," he added, rubbing her stomach. "You know, I think I know what I want to name him."

"You mean her."

"No, I mean him."

Marian laughed. "Okay, if it's a *him* - which it won't be - what do you want to name him?"

"I want to name him after someone very special to me. Someone who has made a big difference in my life. I wouldn't be here today if not for him. It's the least I can do, honey; I owe him so much more than I can possibly give."

He turned in Marian's direction. She could tell he was very serious right now, even through his dark glasses. Marian knew there was only one person he could be talking about.

"I want to name him...Paul."

## Chapter 4



The pitter patter of footsteps echoed in the hallway of the quiet house as the clock struck three. Young Paul Barnes, barely old enough to read, crept into his parents' bedroom, drenched in sweat.

"Mommy," whimpered the small boy.

"What is it, Paulie?"

"I'm scared."

"Wanna lie in bed with Mommy for a while? There there, it's alright. Now, what are you so frightened about?"

"Is Daddy okay?"

"Of course, he's right here beside me. There's nothing to -"

"I saw Daddy get hurt! He was in a wreck! I don't want him to die!"

"It's okay, Paul. Calm down. You'll wake your father."

Too late. Stephen sat up in bed. "What's going on?"

"It's just Paul, honey; he's -"

"Daddy!!" Paul struggled to climb over his mother's body in an attempt to feel his father's embrace. "Why did you crash the car, Daddy? Why did you hurt yourself?" His screaming turned into uncontrollable wailing.

Stephen reached for Paul, unsure of how to calm down his delirious son. He simply held him until his cries abated.

"It's okay, Paul, Daddy's right here. I'm alright; nothing's wrong." As he gripped his son tightly, Stephen couldn't make the puzzlement disappear in his mind. "Paul," he said, hesitating before continuing his question and wondering if this was really the right time to inquire, "what did you mean when you were talking about me crashing the car?"

Paul sniffled. "You crashed the car, Daddy. You were driving the car, and it was raining, and you got in a wreck!" Paul was once again on the verge of tears. "Why did you have to get hurt?"

Stephen's grip on his son loosened. He suddenly felt as if his blindness was hiding a deep secret from him. He glanced around wildly, trying in vain to see whatever it was that Paul could somehow see. Stephen's eyes could not see the worried look on Marian's face, but instead came to rest on Paul.

"Who told you that?"

"What do you mean, Daddy? I just woke up and -"

Stephen grabbed his son violently and shook him. "WHO TOLD YOU TO SAY THAT?!? WHO?!?"

Marian snatched Paul from her husband's hands, jumping out of bed and slowly backing away.



"Don't you dare hurt our son," she said with a quavering voice.

"Is this supposed to be some sort of joke?" Stephen spoke with a sudden sternness in his voice. "Marian, I swear, if you told him to say that..."

Marian stormed out of the room, Paul still in her arms. Stephen could hear her sobs as she ran down the hallway.

*What the hell is going on??? I heard what my son said. He doesn't know anything about what happened. He can't possibly know. Someone had to tell him to say that. A six year-old doesn't just dream about his father getting into a car crash...at least not one that actually happened before he was born.*

Stephen began rifling through a list in his head of people who knew about The Incident and could have possibly been in contact with Paul in the last few days. In the end he had to concede that none of the people that knew about it would be so brazen as to tell Paul. *Where could that notion have come from? He couldn't actually – nah. There's no way. Someone must've let it slip, surely. That's the only thing that makes any sense. Marian might've been talking about it with Sam and Paul just overheard. Yeah, that's it.*

Stephen got up and found his way down the stairs and into the living room. Marian was taking Paul's temperature and wiping the sweat off his brow. Stephen spoke to his wife contritely.

"Listen, I um – I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to lose it back there, I just freaked. I just don't understand why he would say something like that."

"Stephen, can we not talk about this right now? Paul is extremely upset. I think it would be best if you went back to bed. We will discuss this in the morning."

He turned and made his way back up the stairs. Paul called out goodnight from the living room. Stephen did not reply.



"Wow, Dad's gonna be so proud when he sees this!"

"He certainly is! You are such a smart little boy! I think you deserve a special treat. How about some ice cream?"

"Yeah! I'm gonna get good grades every time if I get ice cream!"

"Well if that's all it takes..." Marian glanced up into the rearview mirror at her son, who was brimming with confidence as he held his report card in his lap.

"English – A, Math – A, Social Studies – A. They can't stop me!"

"You want to take some ice cream home to Dad, or do you want me to go pick him up first?"

"Let's pick him up. I want him to see my grades. Then maybe he'll be happy. He likes when I do good in things."

"I know he does, honey." At this point Marian's face grew more somber. It was hard to imagine her husband sitting at home, moping around the house, waiting for a job or a distraction of some sort to fall into his lap. She thought things would get easier as Stephen adjusted to his disability, but instead, his attitude toward life grew progressively dimmer. Sometimes she felt guilty for wishing he would quit whining



and at least try to market himself, at least pretend he wanted to contribute something. They did not *need* the money – Marian made a decent living – but it would not hurt to take a little pressure off of her hectic work schedule. After all, she had supported both he and Paul while earning her degree. The least he could do was show his thanks in some way for the years of selfless service. More than anything, Stephen needed a job to keep him occupied. When Marian left for work and Paul went off to school, he would just sit there with nothing to do, nowhere to go. And there was no telling where his troubled mind would take him.

“Almost there!” Paul shouted, seeing the large stone sign to their neighborhood. It was not the most upscale area of town; Marian’s salary as an occupational therapist was not nearly enough to provide her family with the best house or the most expensive car, but they had never needed to live in luxury. Marian’s primary motivation for choosing her career had never been about the money, anyway. It was about making things easier for her husband. They had lucked out when they discovered this neighborhood when Paul was still an infant. And Stephen and Marian were fortunate to have Sam Walden as their neighbor, especially since Stephen’s mental and emotional condition had deteriorated over the years. Paul needed a more positive and encouraging male role model in his life.

When the car stopped in the driveway, Paul jumped out and sprinted through the front door, yelling for his father.

“Dad! Dad! I got my report card today! Daa-ad! Da –” Paul stopped cold when he got to the kitchen. On the floor was his father, passed out and bleeding from his wrists. The fresh warm blood was flowing down his hands. Dark red pools soaked his pants and had slowly spread across the linoleum. A lump formed in Paul’s throat, leaving him unable to scream. He simply stood there and stared in disbelief and confusion at the horror before his eyes.

“Paulie, where’d you go?” Marian turned the corner into the kitchen. “Oh my God! Stephen! Paul, run next door and get Mr. Walden!”

She frantically grabbed the phone on the wall and dialed 911. Stephen’s face had lost its color, but he was still breathing.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“My husband’s tried to kill himself! He’s bleeding from his wrists! Get an ambulance over here!”

Paul watched the next hour pressed against the living room window of the Walden’s house. He watched the ambulance arrive, paramedics rush into his house, emerge minutes later with his bloody and bandaged father, and finally pull away. He began to cry when his mom blew him a kiss as she stepped into the ambulance to ride to the hospital. That, at least, was a good sign. She always blew him kisses to let him know she loved him and to not worry about anything else.

“Your daddy’s going to be just fine, Paul,” he heard Sam say behind him. Paul did not hear the hesitation in his voice. “They’re going to be able to patch him up good as new.” Paul was glad to have Sam with him. Paul always loved coming over to the Walden’s, if for no other reason than to get away from his own house for a while.





Marian stared into the lost eyes of her husband, lying in the hospital bed. She could not come to grips with everything that had just happened. Their marriage was not easy because of Stephen's state of mind, but it had never been like this. Nothing that threatened Stephen's life, threatened their marriage, threatened their son's innocence. Now Marian was not even sure if Stephen was going to recover from this – mentally or physically – or if he would ever live at home again. It would be difficult for her to trust him alone, and she also had to think about her son's wellbeing.

"Stephen," she managed with the softest and most understanding voice she could muster as all these thoughts plagued her mind. "Stephen, it's me, Marian. Can you hear me?"

He slowly nodded, saying nothing.

"Stephen, do you feel alright?" Marian figured she would start with the easy questions before pelting him with the *What on earth were you thinking?* and the *How could you do such a thing to yourself and to your family?* questions.

Another nod from Stephen was all she received.

Marian cleared her throat. "Honey, I need to know that you're okay."

"I'm fine," Stephen muttered. "I just – I want to be alone for a while."

As much as Marian did not want to leave her husband's side, she decided it may be best for him. She gave his hand a squeeze before turning to the door.

"Come back soon, honey," Marian said as she left the room, her eyes filling with tears.

Stephen closed his eyes and sighed. He had lied. He was not okay. Far from it. He could not even remember the sad and demented trail of thoughts that led him to try to take his own life – only that in the end, suicide seemed to be the best action for everyone. For himself, for Marian.

And Paul – Stephen could not begin to figure out his son. *It's almost like he wants me gone already.* Last week was the fourth time Paul had awoke with nightmares of his father dying or having a near-death experience. *What kind of son dreams about that stuff? He's either just as messed up as me, or he's the most unlucky sleeper ever. Or...* Stephen couldn't bear the thought but dwelled on it nonetheless. *...he wants me out of his life.*

If that was the case, Paul was already beginning to get his wish. Ever since the dreams started, Stephen and his son had experienced a sort of disconnect from each other. Stephen knew he had duties as a father and moments that he should share with Paul, but he simply no longer felt comfortable around his son. He still loved him – at least that is what he told people. One look at their lives together and the minimal interaction that occurred suggested otherwise. The father-son fallout prompted the feelings of depression in the first place.

Stephen reminisced about the last time he laid in a hospital bed battling feelings of desperation and depression. Although nearly seven years had passed, it was hard for Stephen to push the thoughts of The Incident from his mind. The pain he had felt

was immeasurable; he had lost a good friend. *I guess it's not so different this time, either. I'm losing Paul. I can try to ignore the dreams, but they'll still be there. I don't know why I am pushing my son away from me and out of my life. But what am I supposed to do? How else can I react to these dreams? I can't just shrug them off like they don't mean anything. Paul's a good kid, but that doesn't change the situation. It's obvious he doesn't love me. It's obvious he wants me dead.*

Stephen closed his eyes as he tried to fight off tears. Yes, this trip to the hospital was quite similar to the one seven years earlier. There was one glaring difference, however – seven years ago, Stephen found out he would never be able to see again. Now, he could see too much.



A solemn line of pallbearers carried Stephen's casket through the rain and to its final resting place. There his family and friends were waiting to say goodbye one last time. Paul was among them, although he stood before his father in a physical sense only. Paul's nose was dripping with what could only be rain; he felt too callous to cry.

Stephen's death had not been a complete shock to everyone. Considering his long history of suicide attempts, it was expected that another would come. For Paul, it meant the end of a relationship that had come up far short of what it should have been, and he greeted the change with a bitter resolve.

*"Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord."  
"And let perpetual light shine upon him."*

Paul's head shot up so quickly that the sudden motion caught the eyes of a few people around him.

*Those lines – they sound strangely familiar. Why in the world would they sound familiar? I haven't been to any funerals since I was a kid, and I'm not exactly an expert when it comes to burial rites.*

A tall man in a dark overcoat who stood across from Paul gave him an understanding nod. Paul narrowed his eyes and blinked, as much to wake himself up as to remove the rain from his eyes.

*Have I been here before?*



## Chapter 5



"Mom, I'm home!"

Paul slammed the front door shut behind him and glanced around for his mother. "Mom? Where are you?"

He could not help but feel a little uneasy; his mother was always waiting for him at the front door when she knew Paul was coming home from college to visit for a weekend. This time, however, she was nowhere to be seen.

Paul's steps led him through the foyer and into the kitchen. "There you are. I thought you'd be -"

But Paul's sentence was cut short when he saw tears flowing down his mother's face. She clutched an already-soaked tissue in one hand, while tenderly stroking a full-page photograph in an old photo album with her other.

"I miss him so much, Paulie," Marian managed between sobs. Paul recognized his parents' wedding album. Marian's hand rested on a snapshot of the happy newlyweds on their wedding day, moments before stuffing cake into each other's faces.

Paul gulped down a whimper and put an arm around his mother. "I know you miss him, Mom - we all do." This was true to a degree. Paul and his mother both missed Stephen Barnes, but in drastically different ways. While Marian missed the man she fell in love with in high school, Paul missed the father that never was. He missed the *idea* of Stephen as a loving father almost more than he missed Stephen himself. Paul tried his best to console his mother, despite the fact that he had trouble relating to what she was going through.

"Here, look at how handsome he was in that white tuxedo," Marian said, picking up the photo album and holding it out for her son.

With a flurry of emotions churning inside, Paul extended his hands. Thinking about his father inevitably made Paul think of his father's severe bouts with depression, bouts that eventually led to his death. And thinking about his father's depression made Paul think of what caused it - Paul's dreams. By this time, he had experienced dozens of dreams of his father dying or enduring nearly-fatal episodes. Even after his father's death, Paul's mind was still not at ease. His dreams had become so vivid as of late that he was nearly certain they were actually happening. They caused him to feel disembodied, detached from the reality around him. On several occasions, he felt as if he was looking into a portal to the past, reliving events that had already happened - and not just events that happened to him.

Paul had also begun feeling strange tinges of familiarity when thoughts of his father arose. Some felt like more than just dreams. Paul felt as if he had actually experienced them.



As Paul grabbed the photo album from the trembling hands of his mother, one photo slipped out of the book and drifted gently to the floor.

"Oh my, I almost forgot about this photo," Marian said. A faint smile appeared on her face as she held the photo up to Paul's eyes. "He mailed me this photo of him in front of his dorm along with a letter during his first week at college. It was the last photo taken of him before he asked me to marry him."

Paul's spine crawled as the tingling feeling returned. In front of his eyes, he beheld a photo of Stephen Barnes standing in front of his college dormitory. Immediately the room around Paul seemed to start spinning as he felt himself drawn to the photo.

*How does each and every blade of grass look so defined? How does Dad's chest appear to move up and down as if he is actually breathing? And why do I feel like I have seen this place before? There must be other photos of Dad in front of his dorm – photos Mom has shown me in the past.* It was at that moment that Paul realized what he was looking at was no longer a photo. He was physically standing in the grass a matter of feet away from his father. Stephen Barnes not only looked young and happy, but he also still had his sight. Paul knew this right away, or at least as soon as Stephen gave Paul's figure a startled look.

"Hey! You living here, too?"

Paul appeared equally startled, unable to respond.

Stephen eased the tension by throwing his head back and letting out a laugh. "Sorry! Didn't mean to interrogate you before even an introduction." He held out his hand towards Paul. "I'm Stephen."

"I'm, uhh, your – I mean, you're my – hehe, my name's Paul," he said hurriedly.

"Well don't get too excited; classes don't start for another week," Stephen said with a friendly smile. "Hey – how did the photo look from your angle? I'm going to send it to my girlfriend to remind her of what she's missing on the other side of the country." He looked up at Paul. "Her name is Marian."

Paul nearly lost his balance at the sound of his mother's name. He couldn't be sure yet what was happening – either he was talking with his father in the past, or he was having another dream. But this one? This one was not like most of his dreams. It felt much more intense, and it seemed just like real life.

*Is this all real, or just another dream? Were my dreams even dreams at all? I can't tell the difference between this and my real life.*

Paul smacked himself in the side of the head, almost as if to wake himself up. *This can't be a dream. I couldn't be talking to my dad before I was even born unless I'm not dreaming or seeing, but actually living it. All I know is I am here. But I can't even be sure where here is – or when.*

Stephen gave Paul a puzzled look. "You okay, man? You just hit yourself. I know move-in day is stressful, but there are better ways of coping."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Paul responded. "Just thinking about something." He knew he had to keep it together if he wanted to have a normal conversation with his dad. *Ha! Normal. This whole thing is anything but normal. I oughta be pulling my hair out and hearing voices by now. This is crazy. My suicidal mental-case father is telling me how to cope. I*



*shouldn't even be talking to him right now. He shouldn't even be alive. But I can deal with this. I can cope. I'm not like you, Dad.*

"So, what room you staying in here?" Paul asked, trying to avoid an awkward silence.

"Oh, I'm in room 312. How about you? You live in this dorm, too?"

"Well, actually, I uhh," Paul began to search around frantically for the right words, "I live off campus. Pretty long commute actually."

"That's cool. So, there's a game later tonight. I was thinking about going with my roommate and a few other guys. You wanna come? Free food."

"That would be...great. Just tell me when and where and we can meet up - I hope."

"What do you mean 'I hope'?"

"Oh, nothing. Just...I'm a little tired. Been a long day."

"Oh. Well, you're welcome to stick around until then. I just have to finish unpacking my things. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'd love to help."

With that, the two of them grabbed the last of Stephen's luggage and carted it up the stairs. Paul was unsure of what would happen next, but he did not care. Whatever brought him to this time and place, he was talking with his dad, and his dad actually seemed to enjoy it. Nothing else mattered.



He knew exactly how it had all happened; he could see it clearly in his mind. Only it had not happened. He had no prior memory of the event, just the feeling of recollection that overcame him in that moment. Paul felt like he was remembering something that had never actually occurred. *But how can I see a vivid picture of an event - its location and everyone's reactions - if I haven't experienced it yet?*

Paul was sitting across from Stephen in a large booth at one of the campus dining courts, discussing relationships and life and missed opportunities. They had plenty to chat about after two weeks of classes - classes that Paul had not been attending. He had been spending nights wherever he could find room; last night, it had been in a quiet, secluded corner of the library. His interaction with Stephen and the other guys from the dorm had been limited, given Paul's dire straits and the need to scope out a new place to crash every night. And the food - well, Paul was playing that one a day at a time, as well. Right now, as had been the case several times this week already, he was bumming a few bucks off his friends to grab a bite. He had every intention of paying them back in full; he just did not know when that would be or how he would come up with the money. Or if he would even still be around by then.

But at the moment, he was not concerned with any of this. Stephen had just brought up how much he loved football and how he and the guys had been playing every chance they got over the past week. Paul had immediately been hit with that



uneasy feeling of familiarity, like he not only knew exactly what Stephen was talking about, but also could picture it clearly in his head. And in these images, Paul was right there with them, running patterns and catching touchdowns – he was one of the best out there! *Only it had never happened. Had it?*

"You like football, Paul?"

"Huh?"

Stephen's voice had ripped through Paul's thoughts and jolted him back to the present. Or the past, or whenever this was. Paul still was not entirely sure and was getting sick of the mental time play.

"You looked like you were in another world."

Paul laughed. *You have no idea, man.* "Yeah, I – I play a little here and there, you know, when I get the chance."

Stephen's eyes lit up. "You should come play with us sometime," he said. "We're pretty good, so you better come ready to play. A few of the guys played in high school. You know Adam? He was a great Q.B."

Again, the recollections flared up in Paul's brain. *I knew that – I knew Adam was a high school quarterback. I've seen him play, for crying out loud! Haven't I? I remember it...at least, it feels like I do. How would I know this stuff if I haven't ever played with these guys? I never knew any of them before, obviously; we're from different times. And yet, this information can't just be coming from nowhere, especially since it all seems to be prophetically true.*

"Hey, you okay, Paul? I'm seriously starting to worry about you, buddy."

"Oh...sorry." Paul realized both his hands were clenched into fists on the table in front of him. One of them had smashed through the remains of a donut, leaving frosting and crumbs all over his palm. He decided to try and play it off like some other feelings were surfacing. Homesickness – that was it. "Guess I've just been missing home. Do you ever wonder if you were never supposed to come here, like you're missing out on something somewhere else?"

Stephen looked him dead in the eye and said, "Every day."

Paul nearly fell out of the booth as the déjà vu feeling hit him with deadening force. *This has happened before – I'm sure of it. I said those exact lines, and he responded with that same response. I've been here before! That's all there is to it! I don't know how, but I am in the past, and I have lived this exact moment before! Whatever brought me to this time did it to me already, some time ago; I just can't be sure of when...or how many times it's happened...*

"That's it – I'm taking you to the hospital!" Stephen jumped out of his seat and grabbed Paul. He used a napkin to wipe the drool from Paul's mouth and the sweat from his forehead. "You're not well, Paul! C'mon, let me help you up."

Stephen lifted Paul from his seat and supported him with his right arm as the two began awkwardly shuffling out to the car. The daylight was completely gone, leaving only dark and cloudy skies to greet the pair. They emerged from the dining hall into a shower of cold rain.

Paul was still drooling as Stephen plopped him into the passenger seat of his car. The cold rain had jogged his senses a bit, and he was able to sit up under his own power. "How far is it to the hospital?"



"Not far," Stephen said. "Just down to the end of this street, around the corner, and then four more blocks east."

*Those directions sound eerily familiar, too. This must have happened before, too. Only –*

Paul's eyes widened as a new set of memories invaded his head, horrific memories. Memories of his own death. He frantically turned to Stephen, who was already driving them down towards the end of the street.

"Stop! You can't take me to the hospital!"

"Yes, I can, and I will!" Stephen's voice was stern. "You need to go, Paul. You can stay there overnight if you need to, or crash at my place; don't worry about getting home tonight."

Paul shook his head with desperation building. "No, you don't understand! We can't go this way! You don't know what's going to happen!"

Stephen turned to Paul. "And you do? What are you talking about?" He threw the wheel into a sharp left turn around the corner, causing the tires to squeal as they flew along the wet pavement.

Paul stared deep into his father's eyes. "Dad, if you've ever listened to me, listen to me right now."

"What did you call me?"

"Don't let your blindness get in the way of your family. And whatever you do, don't worry about your son's dreams! That's all they are – dreams!"

Stephen was now facing Paul with an extremely concerned look on his face. "Paul, you're sick! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Just don't worry about my dreams, Dad! Don't kill yourself!" Paul saw Stephen's face suddenly illuminated by the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. Before he could speak another word, he felt an agonizing crunch as he and Stephen lurched forward from the impact. The collision sent the back ends of both vehicles spinning counterclockwise while the driver's sides were compressed like aluminum cans. Paul felt his face buried in the passenger-side airbag, where he passed out. The last sound he remembered hearing was the short and hollow breathing of his father, lying crushed next to him.



Sirens and flashing lights surrounded Paul as he came to. He faced the night sky, and after his eyes finally focused on the stars above, he realized he was moving. Paul tried to sit up, but his motion was cut short by a bearded man who leaned his head down and into Paul's line of vision.

"Oh, no you don't," the man said. "You got a nasty hit on the head from the rearview mirror. Came flying right off and clocked you pretty good. You're going to have to lie still 'til they get you checked out at the hospital."

The man and a few others continued carrying Paul to the ambulance. He did not see Stephen's body in there, or anywhere around the emergency vehicle. Paul suddenly felt very cold.

"Hey, where's my dad?"

One of the paramedics turned towards Paul. "What's that, kid?"

"The other guy in the car!" Paul was beginning to get impatient. "Where is he? Is he okay?"

The paramedic's eyes dropped down to Paul's torso, as if he could no longer look him in the face. "Just, uh – just lay down and rest, kid."

"That's my dad in there! THAT'S DAD!" Paul was now shouting with what little strength he could muster in his injured state.

The paramedic walked away, leaving Paul alone lying on a gurney in the ambulance. Paul continued to shout for his dad, but his cries went unattended. He could hear the paramedics talking several feet away.

"Looks like he's got a little whiplash and a pretty big gash across the forehead, but other than that he seems fine."

"What about him going on about the other guy being his dad?"

"I don't know. Probably from the head injury. He's just a little shaken up. We need to get him to the hospital. There's nothing more we can do for him here."

At the hospital, the doctor dressed his wounds and stitches his forehead. By that time, Paul had calmed down enough to understand what was going on, but he continued to ask everyone he could about his dad.

"Is my dad okay? Stephen Barnes, my dad. What happened to him?"

No one seemed to pay attention to his questions. No one even came into his room. Outside in the hallway, the doctor began recounting Paul's symptoms to the nurse as she wrote on her clipboard.

"Minor cuts and bruises, deep gash across the left side of his forehead. He keeps calling the driver of the car his father. Run a CAT scan, check for any brain damage, abnormalities, etc. Also, did you get his insurance information yet?"

"Actually, he doesn't have any. He says he's homeless. No money, no I.D., nothing at all. He insists that he's Stephen Barnes' son, Paul."

"That's strange. He must be suffering from some sort of amnesia. Administer the tests and we'll find out what's going on with this kid."

One of the paramedics from the accident brushed by the doctor and into Paul's room. He walked up next to Paul and put his hand on his shoulder.

"How ya doin, bud? Name's Sammy – I'm the EMT that strapped you down and brought you to the hospital. I don't know how to say this, but...well, you're my first car accident victim, and I wanted to check in on you. My shift just finished, so I thought I'd say hey."

Paul's eyes widened as he looked up and saw an old family friend smiling down at him.

"You're Sam! Sam Walden!"

"Yeah, do I know you?"



"I, uh, heard someone mention your name in the ambulance."

"Oh, I see. Well, I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm gonna give you my number here." Sam handed Paul a small piece of scrap paper from his back pocket. "If you need anything, just let me know. Looks like you'll be just fine, Paul. They patched you up without too much trouble." With that, Sam turned to leave the room.

"Sam - wait!" Paul shouted. "What about the other guy in the car with me? Did you save him, too? Is he okay?"

Sam hung his head, unable to look Paul in the eyes. He hovered in the doorway for a moment before walking into the hallway in silence. He had not said a word. To Paul, however, it was more than he could bear to hear.

## Chapter 6



The receptionist walked into the waiting room with a blank look on her face, almost robotic in her predetermined routine.

"Dylan Jacobs?"

A middle-aged man with unkempt hair and a half-tucked shirt glanced to either side before standing up. He then followed the nurse through the door, walking gingerly as if to avoid causing any noise.

*What a headcase. Should I really be here?* Paul thought about walking out at that very moment, even though he knew his name would be one of the next ones called. Checking himself into a mental health clinic hadn't been the easiest thing he had ever done, to say the least. It certainly had not been Paul's first option to help him deal with the psychological quagmire in his head. However, two years out of the hospital following the car wreck still had not brought him any relief. It seemed there was little else he could do. And a strict order from his doctor had left him no other choice.

Paul looked up to see if the nurse had come for the next patient yet. His eyes instead locked with those of a young child sitting in the chair opposite Paul. The boy must have been no older than five, but he had an unsettling look about him. He continued staring at Paul, even after Paul shifted his gaze back to his lap.

*Great, just what I need – a creepy kid staring at me. As if I needed anything else to make me feel uncomfortable. I already haven't gotten a full night of sleep since that horrible night. It wasn't supposed to happen like this! I was supposed to die in the wreck, and Dad was supposed to live! I tried to save him – I tried to tell him what he needed to know so his life wouldn't be full of suffering. And all I ended up doing was distracting myself from what was going on and preventing myself from saving him! If only I had done something different...*

A quick glance up let Paul know he was still being watched. *I still don't even know how in the world I'm still here, alive. My father died before I was born, for crying out loud. If he wasn't alive to help conceive me, I never would have been born...which means I never could have gone back in time...which means I shouldn't be here right now.* Paul shifted uneasily in his seat. *What if I can't get back to the present? What if there isn't even a present to get back to? Have I just created a new reality in which my father dies in a car wreck and I am never born? Then who am I?*

Paul's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a door closing. A woman walked out of the restroom behind Paul and past his left shoulder, towards the boy in the chair. She reached down to pick him up in her arms and spin him around.

"Hi, honey, almost our turn!"

Paul looked up at the woman holding her child. His jaw dropped as he watched his very young mother coddling the toddler. *Oh my god! Mom? Who's that kid? Is that...me?*



"Well, what are you staring at, mister? Haven't you seen a mother playing with her kid?" Paul noticed the disapproving countenance on his mother's face as she glared back at him.

"I'm sorry, I – I didn't mean to stare." Paul decided to pry; it was the only way to find out the information he desperately needed to know. "Uh, Ms., what is your child's name?"

Marian sighed. "His name is Stephen."

Paul had to concentrate to keep his breathing from speeding up and sounding conspicuous. "And, uh, if you don't mind telling me, what are you and your son doing in a place like this?"

"What's that matter to you?" Marian shot back. "It's none of your business, anyway."

Paul leaned back in his chair. He kept his eyes down and away from young boy sitting opposite him. *I don't know if that kid is my dad, or me, or some other version of one of us, or what. I have no idea what's going on anymore. But if it is somehow me – a different me than the one who grew up with a blind father – maybe he isn't haunted by the same nightmares; maybe his life was made better by his father's death.*

"Stephen Hodges," called the receptionist from behind the counter. Marian and her son stood up.

"Mommy, will this make the bad dreams go away?" said young Stephen, grabbing Marian's hand as they turned towards the door.

"I hope so, honey," she said with sorrowful eyes. "C'mon, let's go."

Before Paul could react, they turned and walked through the door to greet the therapist. Paul was suddenly overcome by a rush of emotions. All these long months spent grieving over his father's death and he had nearly forgotten that his other parent was still around, still in the same reality as he. He remembered watching her from a distance at his father's funeral, thinking about how cruel fate must be to make her suffer through such tragedy twice. Only, this Marian never had to cope with the depression, the anxiety, and the numerous failed suicide attempts that accompanied her troubled relationship with Stephen. But she still looked so devastated by her child's mental issues – perhaps even more so than Paul remembered from the reality he came from.

*Why would that be? Is she not happily married to another man? I mean, the nurse called her son 'Stephen Hodges', so I'm assuming she married someone –*

Paul's head suddenly drooped into his hands. *Of course! Mom's maiden name was Hodges! How could I forget...which means she never married. Then who is this kid? And who is his father?*

As the questions continued to build without any concrete answers in sight, Paul decided to leave. *I can get my own issues checked out here anytime. But who knows when I'll ever run into my mom and her child, whether it is me or not, ever again?*

Paul walked outside and hopped into his car, grabbing the keys and placing them in the ignition. He had no intention, however, of starting his car, at least not yet. Not until his new subjects of interest emerged from the building.





The wind blew through the trees outside Paul's office, causing them to bend and sway. Paul found it strangely therapeutic to watch, perhaps because it reminded him that he was not the only thing being tossed around by the cruel forces of nature, or fate, or whatever this was. He stared at the trees, head resting in hands, and sighed. This was all new for Paul; he had never had a steady job before, let alone his own office. While elementary school counseling had never been Paul's primary career choice, he could not pass on the opportunity. His research over the last few years on sleep patterns and brain activity in children had made him an ideal candidate for the position. This meant Paul did not have to beg and plead to get the job, which he was prepared to do if necessary. He had to have this job – it was the only way to reach him.

Paul spun in a circle in his swivel chair. *Now I just have to figure out how to make contact. I need to talk to Stephen Hodges. I need to know who he really is and what is going on inside his head. Following him around and watching from a distance is no longer enough. It helped me find out where he was going to school, but now it's time for the next step: confrontation.*

"Mr. Barnes? You have a visitor."

The voice that came over the intercom made Paul jump. "Uh, alright, send 'em in." He turned to his door to see the shape of a young woman.

"Can I help you?" Paul offered.

"Hi, I'm not sure if we've met, but I'm Kelly Farber, one of the third grade teachers. There was – an episode in my class this morning, and I was told you might be able to help."

Paul narrowed his eyes. "An episode? What happened, Miss Farber?"

"Kelly, please," she said with a laugh and a slight bend of her knees. "One of my students fell asleep and woke up screaming about, well – I think you should just talk to him. You might understand what's going on better than me."

Paul nodded. "I'll see what I can do." He spun back around to face the window. *This could be my first real one-on-one with a student. Exciting, but also a little scary. I wonder if Kelly has time to sit in on this one.*

"So will you be with –"

Paul stopped his sentence short. His eyes had returned to the door, but there was no sign of Miss Farber. Instead, standing eerily silent in the doorway was a young boy, no older than nine years. His brown hair was tussled atop his head, and his eyes were filled with hurt – more hurt than any seven-year-old should know. And his face was unmistakably familiar.

"Hi, I'm Mr. Barnes. What's your name?" Paul asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Stephen."

Paul had trouble meeting Stephen in the eyes. "Have a seat, Stephen." He took a deep breath while mentally preparing himself for what was about to happen. *This is exactly what you wanted. This is why you came here. Make it worthwhile.*



"How are you feeling, Stephen?"

"Fine."

"You don't look fine – you look upset. What is upsetting you, Stephen?" No response. Paul inched closer to Stephen. "It's okay, you can tell me. I'm here to help you."

Stephen's head drooped down, his chin nearly resting upon his chest, and remained silent.

"Was it something that happened in class?" Stephen nodded. "What happened, Stephen?"

"Why does he have to keep getting hurt?" Stephen said on the verge of tears. "I don't want him to die!"

"Who? You don't want who to die?" Paul was now just a dozen inches from Stephen's face.

Stephen struggled to speak as he began to cry. "I – I don't know!"

Paul grabbed Stephen by the shoulders and held his shaking body in place. "Stephen, listen to me. I can help you. I know what's happening to you. I know what you're going through. I even know who you keep seeing getting hurt in your dreams."

Stephen looked up with a look of surprise. "How did you know I was having bad dreams?"

Paul stopped, realizing he had overstepped his boundaries. "You know, I used to have the same dreams you're having now. And I can help make it better – you just have to listen carefully, answer some questions, and do what I tell you to do."

"Okay," Stephen said with a sniff.

Paul was now certain that the kid sitting in front of him was a younger version of himself. He looked like him, he talked like him, and he even had the same horrible dreams that Paul had at that age. The only question that remained was who was this boy's father?

"Stephen, I believe the man you see getting hurt in your dreams is your Daddy."

"I don't have a daddy. Mommy said he died before I was born."

*That was it. Stephen Barnes was the father – this boy must have already been conceived when Stephen died in the wreck. It could have happened when Stephen was visiting Marian at the end of that summer, just before school started. Neither of them would have even known yet. Now Marian's increased devastation at her son's mental state makes perfect sense, considering the situation. Having a child who has nightmares of his father's death is disturbing enough, but I can't imagine how this must feel.*

"Stephen," Paul said with purpose, "you do have a daddy. His name is Stephen."

"That's my name!" Finally a glimmer of hope appeared in young Stephen's eyes.

"I know. His name is Stephen Barnes, and he is a great man...a great friend..."

Paul was now the one finding himself choked up. "...And he would have been a great father if he would have been given a chance – a fair chance to be the man he was going to be!"

"You knew my daddy?" Stephen asked, suddenly very interested.



"Oh, yes, I knew him very well. Better than I thought I ever would." He reached over and put a hand on Stephen's head. "You're lucky to be named after him."

Paul had figured that one out on his own. Even though he was looking at a younger version of himself, the boy could not possibly be named Paul – Paul had not saved his father's life, so there was no reason to name anyone after him. To his knowledge, Marian never even knew he existed. She obviously named her son after his deceased father, her lost love.

Young Stephen's face, which had momentarily brightened, again became troubled. "But how do I make the dreams about Daddy go away?"

"I – I'm afraid I'm not sure, Stephen."

"But you said you could help me!" Stephen was now nearly screaming, and Paul had to grab him by the shoulders again to calm him down.

"I can still help you. But you have to promise me a few things, okay?"

Stephen unclenched the sides of his chair. "Okay."

"First, you have to promise me not to worry too much about the dreams. Also, you have a mommy who loves you very much. She wants to help you, so you should listen to her. Be sure to let her know you love her and give her lots of hugs. Can you do that, Stephen?"

Stephen nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Alright. Now you have to promise me one more thing," Paul said with fiercely concentrated eyes. "And this one is the most important of all. You must promise me that you will learn to accept things just the way they turn out. Everything happens for a reason. That's just how it is, how it was, and how it's going to be. What you need to do is accept that."

Stephen stared back at Paul. He wanted to hear so much more about his father – about a man who he never met but who this man somehow knew so much about. However, all he could do was give Paul the answer he wanted. "I promise."

Paul stood up and walked Stephen to the door. "Oh, and one more thing, Stephen. Your father would've loved you very much. Trust me." And with that, he put a hand on Stephen's back and pointed him out the door. "Oh, and Stephen, I'd like to talk some more next week if your teacher says it's okay. Same time next Monday?"

Stephen nodded. Paul could hear his quiet footsteps echoing all the way down the hall. The moment was over – Paul did not know how many chances he would have to talk to his younger self – but he felt good about it. Everything he had wanted to say and do, he had said and done.

Paul exhaled. *Whew! Years of research and preparation, and I finally did it – I got to talk to him! Or me – or whoever. I don't know if the dreams will ever go away, even in a different timeline or reality, but I know the feelings of emptiness and loneliness can. If he just does what I told him to do, everyone's lives will be better...and he will have done what I have not yet been able to do – let go.*

For the first time in years, Paul was filled with hope. He decided to go for a walk and use some of the energy he had acquired from this newfound feeling.



"Lisa, I'm taking my lunch break," Paul announced to the secretary as he walked out the school office.

"Lunch? Mr. Barnes, it's 9:45 in the morning!"

"Lunch break!" Paul shouted as he grabbed his jacket and flew out the door.

*This breeze feels great. It's a beautiful day out here – and I honestly don't remember the last time I said that. Just something about knowing that I might have just helped someone's life makes me feel more at ease about my own. It's more than a feeling of accomplishment; it's triumphant.*

Paul had already reached the edge of school grounds. *I feel like I made some progress in my life, too. I've lived the last several years in anticipation for that moment. I don't know what comes next, but I have to keep in contact with him. I'm convinced I survived that wreck so I could change my family's future and my own, and today was the first step.*

*Stephen Barnes wasn't the best father, but he was a father to me. Maybe it's for the best that his legacy is what it is, and not the senseless tragedy it once was. I guess my job here is done, right? I wonder what happens now. He paused briefly before stepping into the street. If he doesn't ever go back to the past, what happens to me? Did I ever go back? Do I even exist anymore? What if Stephen erases everything that was or could've been by not going back? That's crazy! I mean, I'm still here, aren't I?*

The sound of squealing tires caused Paul to jump and whip left just in time to see the car before it made direct impact with his body. It was the last thing Paul Barnes ever saw.

## Chapter 7



"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Stephen..."

Marian held the final note of her son's name extra long and threw her right arm up in the air for dramatic flair, causing a few laughs from the group of relatives gathered around the kitchen table.

"...Happy birthday to you!"

Stephen stared down at the homemade cake in front of him, beautifully adorned with frosting in his two favorite colors – maroon and gold. His eyes ran across the masterpiece that his mother had lovingly made for him.

"Count 'em – they're all there," she said, leaning over at Stephen's side and gesturing at the candles, "all twenty-one of them. Now go ahead and make a wish."

Stephen's smile faded as he watched the candles flicker in the dim light. *Well, that should be easy to do.* He paused, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

*Please, God, make them go away.*

One powerful and carefully-aimed breath blew out all twenty-one candles. Cheers and applause rained down on Stephen, but he hardly noticed. He was not a very religious person, and he certainly was not one to place much credence on some superstitious act like making a wish before blowing out candles on a birthday cake. But something about this moment felt different than before. Stephen felt like his wish might actually come true – like the nightmares might finally come to an end.

"Okay, everyone – present time!" Marian shouted. "Everyone give your gifts to me and I'll put them at the foot of the couch for Stephen." As she struggled to pick up several carefully-wrapped boxes, she turned to Stephen.

"Oh, honey, I almost forgot – I hid my present for you in the attic. Can you go run up there and grab it for me?"

Stephen nodded. "Sure, Mom." He welcomed the moment away from everyone. Stephen liked his relatives, but he did not feel close to anyone outside his immediate family. And for an only-child with a single parent, that meant just his mother. The two of them were inseparable, and as lame as it may have sounded to his friends to have his Mom as his best friend, Stephen did not care. He absolutely loved her and could not imagine living anywhere else. That was part of the reason why Stephen had decided not to go to college after graduating high school – he could not bear the thought of moving away. Besides, he had made a promise long ago to a man who somehow seemed to know about Stephen's problem. A man whose words had stuck in Stephen's head for more than ten years. A man named Paul Barnes.

Stephen shot up the staircase and into the attic. *Now, where did she put that present?* His eyes scanned the floor for any scraps of brightly-colored wrapping paper.



Instead, Stephen spotted a very thick, neatly-bound hardcover book. *Greatest Games of the NFL – awesome! This must be it; Mom must have forgotten to wrap it. I wonder why...*

Next to the book sat a pile of birthday supplies. *I'll go ahead and wrap it myself. I'd hate to embarrass Mom in front of everyone by bringing down her gift unwrapped.* He grabbed a roll of tape, a pair of scissors, and a sheet of wrapping paper from the party supplies. Something shiny causing a reflection from the lone light in the room caught his eye. Underneath the wrapping paper was a pile of old photos covered in dust. Stephen looked through them one after another, surprised that he had never seen any of them before. They were all pictures of the same person. His mother was in some of them, usually standing or sitting next to the man in some mushy couple's pose.

Stephen sifted through the stack of faded and musty pictures until he found the one glossy photograph sticking out amongst the rest. He picked it up and examined it under the dim light bulb. It was a picture of the man standing in front of a building and bearing a cheesy grin. *Who is this? Why does Mom have all these pictures of him in our attic? Why has she never shown these pictures to me? It must be one of Mom's old boyfriends.* Stephen was fascinated by the mysterious picture he now held in his hand. It was the only glossy laminated photo in the whole stack. *What makes this one so different from the others?* Stephen couldn't see anything particularly unique about the picture. He stared at it a while longer, trying to figure out who the enigmatic man in the picture could be. *Maybe it's my father. But why wouldn't Mom show it to me? Why did she never talk to me about him? It was like he never existed.*

A light breeze blew through Stephen's hair as he stared ahead even more intensely. *Whoever it is, he must have been important enough to save all these pictures.* Stephen could now feel the midday sun beating down on his cheeks. He could hear the sounds of a marching band playing somewhere in the distance. The man in front of him blinked and reached his hand forward to take a camera from the woman in front of him.

"Thanks for taking the pic for me. My girlfriend's gonna love it!" The man looked down at the Polaroid for a couple seconds and stuffed it into his back pocket.

"Hey, you alright?" the man asked Stephen.

Stephen was so entranced that he did not even notice he was being questioned.

"Been out in the sun too long, eh? I saw you staring at me. You look a little worried."

When Stephen realized the man in front of him was talking, he stumbled over backwards and shouted, "What's going on!?! Where am I?"

The man's eyes widened as he stepped away from Stephen. Several bystanders turned their heads at the commotion. "Are you having a panic attack or something? What's your name?"

"Who are you!?! What are you doing in my attic?"

"Whoa, I don't know what you're talking about, but we're outside right now. My name's Stephen. Who are you?"

"My name is Stephen!"



By now a crowd had gathered around the two of them, waiting in anticipation to see what the crazed lunatic would say next. Stephen was becoming more confused by the second.

"I think I should take you over to the hospital. You might have sun poisoning."

"What are you talking about? I'm supposed to be in my house right now. It's my birthday."

The man reached down to help Stephen to his feet. "Well happy birthday, buddy. Let's head over to my car and I'll take you to the hospital." He gave a shameful glance to the group of people surrounding them. "What are you all looking at? Get the hell out of here, all of you!"

Stephen's eyes darted wildly back and forth as he tried to understand what was going on. He gradually calmed himself as the other Stephen helped him to his car.

"I - I don't understand," he said in an increasingly weakening voice.

The man shook his head. "I'm not an expert or anything, but I'm guessing you've been working out here in the sun a little too long this afternoon. The same thing happened to a friend of mine last fall - you know, nausea, dizziness - so I took him to the hospital, and they just kept him for the night, running tests and whatnot." He shot Stephen a smile as he turned the ignition and started speaking in his best doctor's voice. "Did you put on any sunscreen today?"

"Sunscreen?" Stephen was still baffled. "I've been inside all day. It's still spring, you know," he said, not entirely sure whether or not to believe the words that were coming out of his mouth.

The other Stephen laughed. "Yeah, and I'm the star of the football team." A blank look from Stephen. "Wake up! Look outside! It's fall - hello!"

Stephen's head dropped back against the headrest on the passenger seat. *This is too much. I was just in my attic looking at a picture, and now I'm having another dream. Maybe if I jump out of this car while it's moving, I'll wake up...* He clutched the door handle.

"Boy, we sure caused a nice little commotion back there," came the voice of the other Stephen, interrupting Stephen's dangerous line of thought. "Hope you weren't trying to impress anyone. I mean, girls love a sensitive guy, but you were laying it on pretty thick."

"What did you say your name was?" Stephen interjected.

"I'm Stephen. Stephen Barnes. Nice - and weird - to meet you."

Stephen placed his hand over his chest. "I'm Stephen Hodges." He could at least be sure of that much.

"Hodges, huh? That's the same last name as my girlfriend, Marian."

Stephen Hodges shot upright in his seat. "Marian Hodges? That's my mom!"

"No way!" Stephen Barnes responded with a chuckle. "That's her name, too? Crazy!"

"No - I mean..." Stephen Hodges' voice trailed off. *I can't sound like a complete nut to this guy - he's dating my mom, for crying out loud! In this dream, this is Mom's boyfriend, the same guy who was in all those photos. Then maybe this isn't just any dream.*



*And maybe this is actually my dad.* All of a sudden, Stephen Hodges did not want to wake up from this one, at least not yet.

"Well we're almost there," Stephen Barnes said. "The hospital is right around this corner." He looked back at his newest acquaintance. "Want me to come in, or you think you're okay from here?"

Stephen Hodges thought about this for a moment. *This guy's alright. I never knew my father, so if this is him, I'd love to have any sort of memory with him, even if it's from a dream. I'm not ready to lose sight of him yet.* He gingerly put his left hand against his forehead to feign a headache as the car rolled to a stop in the parking lot. "I don't know, I'm still feeling pretty woozy..."

Stephen Barnes sighed and walked around the car to help him out, slightly grinning. "Alright, Miss Drama Queen, let's get you inside." He began walking Stephen Hodges towards the entrance, arm outstretched around his shoulder.



The sun's final rays were reaching out across the freshly-cut grass on the university green, as if still clinging to each blade before slipping off the surface of the earth. Stephen Hodges enjoyed seeing the sun set as he trotted down the sidewalk, especially considering his recent condition. Two weeks in the hospital and out of the August sun had caught up with him, and he had lots of lost time to make up. What began as apparent sun poisoning had turned out to be influenza, which led to a mild case of pneumonia. Needless to say, finally being able to walk outside and enjoy the fresh air of an autumn evening did wonders for Stephen's spirits.

*I can't believe I missed two weeks of my life stuck in the hospital! Well, if this is my life and not some dream, I should say. I'm still not sure of anything. But I've never had a dream last two weeks before.* His thoughts drifted to Stephen Barnes. *And I've never had a complete stranger show me so much care and attention. It's his first two weeks of college – two of the most important weeks in his life – and he spent time visiting me! He still went to classes and met new friends in his dormitory, but several trips to the hospital to check on someone he had only just met? Well, that's something special.*

Stephen picked up his pace as he neared the dining hall where he was to meet his new friend for dinner. It would be their first interaction outside the walls of the hospital since their initial confrontation. Stephen thought back to when he was stuck in the hospital and woke up from a nap to see Stephen Barnes sitting in the chair next to his bed studying his Spanish homework. Stephen Hodges had merely smiled and closed his eyes, not ever letting his visitor know he had awakened for a moment. Just to know that someone out there cared enough about him to spend time by his side – even when he did not know it – was a feeling Stephen Hodges was not used to feeling. He had never had a strong male presence in his life, let alone someone he could call a father. However, Stephen Barnes, in many ways, was beginning to fill that hole in his life.



The door to the dining hall flew open as Stephen Hodges gave it a good tug. *I'm beginning to hope this whole thing isn't a dream, and that it's really happening. I think I could get used to the college campus life, and I've already got a start on making friends. If only Mom could be here, too...*

At that moment, he could swear he heard his mother's voice behind him, saying, "I miss you too, baby." Stephen whipped around to see Stephen Barnes several feet back, talking on a pay-phone.

"I love you. Bye." Stephen Barnes hung up the phone and saw Stephen Hodges. "Hey, look at you! All better!"

"Who were you just talking to on the phone?"

Stephen Barnes smiled. "Oh, that was my girlfriend Marian. You would love her, Stephen. I just have this feeling you guys would get along well."

"Yeah, I think so, too. C'mon, let's go get something to eat - I'm starving! And I've been living on hospital food for the last two weeks!"

"Consider yourself lucky," Stephen Barnes said with a laugh. "Welcome to college dining."

Minutes later, the two plopped down in a booth and began to dig in to their dinners. Stephen Hodges' mind was still on the conversation he had just had about his mother. Without seeming too forthright, he decided to pry further into his friend's personal life.

"Any thoughts about what the future holds for you and Marian yet?" It felt weird calling his mother by her first name.

"Sure!" Stephen Barnes responded without hesitation. "I mean, I know we're still young, but I would be ready to marry her if we weren't so far apart. She's all I've been able to think about for years now. She's everything to me."

Stephen Hodges felt a smile creep across his face. *This is my dad; there's no doubt in my mind anymore. The love he has for Marian is obvious, and it's the kind that can last a lifetime. Besides, I know my mom, and this is exactly the type of guy - smart, sensitive, caring, and funny - that she would want to spend the rest of her life with.*

"What are you thinking about?"

Stephen Hodges blushed; he felt as if his thoughts were so loud and evident that people around him could hear them. He looked up from his burrito and deep into Stephen Barnes' eyes.

"Do you ever wonder if you were never supposed to come here, like you're missing out on something somewhere else?"

Stephen Barnes looked him dead in the eye and said, "Every day."

The two finished their meals in silence, each absorbed by thoughts of the possible. Stephen Barnes was the first to finish and stand up.

"Well, I better get back to the dorm - got a bunch of homework to do. Where are you living? Are you on campus, too?"

"I, uh," Stephen Hodges stammered, not having thought about how to explain his predicament. "I'm going to go for a run right now. I'll catch up with you sometime later."



"Okay." Stephen Barnes paused one last time before turning to leave. "You sure you don't want a ride anywhere?"

"I'm good, thanks. Gonna go enjoy the fresh air."

"Alright, well, it was great catching up. I'll see ya around!" With that, Stephen Barnes walked outside and toward his car in the parking lot. Stephen Hodges followed him through the door before turning onto the sidewalk for a jog.

*Man, that was close. I haven't even thought about how I'm going to fit in now that I'm out of the hospital. Where can I stay that isn't too far from Stephen and his friends? There's no way I can get away with staying in the dorm; they'll know I'm not a student here. And that doesn't even begin to cover food! Stephen's not going to treat me to dinner like this every day! I've got a lot to figure out...*

As Stephen jogged, he began to feel a few drops of water fall innocently from the sky above. Within a few moments, the suddenly-dark sky opened up and let out a cold rain. The icy drops jolted Stephen awake, as if he had been merely watching the last two weeks unfold through the eyes of a body that was not his own and not under his control. He glanced around wildly, recognizing his surroundings and his location on campus.

*I've never walked this part of campus before – or have I? Why does it all feel suddenly familiar? Why does each step feel like it has already been taken? And why do I feel like I know what is about to happen?*

Stephen's eyes shot down the street that Stephen Barnes' car had traveled. Memories came flooding in. *I know where that road leads. It leads to tragedy; to horror. It leads to death.* He started in a dead sprint down the road, frantically searching for a glimpse of the vehicle. *Stephen, wait! You weren't supposed to leave without me!!*

His hurried strides led him across the street and into an alley. *This is a shortcut, I know it. Somehow, I know it.* Stephen had not run this hard or this fast for a very long time – in fact, he had not had any sort of physical activity since recovering from pneumonia. However, neither his heart nor his lungs could slow him down now. He was running on pure adrenaline and fear.

The rain continued to pour as Stephen jumped over puddles and dodged potholes in the alley. He could now see the street ahead on which he would emerge in a moment. It looked very slick, almost entirely covered with water. *Stephen, no! I need you in my life! You can't leave me!!*

Stephen Hodges burst out of the alley and into the street just in time to be blinded by a pair of quickly approaching headlights. Then came the impact, which sent him flying into the curb and slamming onto the hard cement. Stephen sensed a feeling of numbness overcoming his body just before slipping into unconsciousness.



"Stephen! Stephen!"

Stephen Hodges slowly opened his eyes as he felt his limp body being shaken.



"For God's sake, wake up, Stephen!" It was Stephen Barnes who knelt at Stephen's side with tear-filled eyes and shaking hands.

"What - what happened?" Stephen Hodges mumbled.

"It was so slick, Stephen," came the trembling voice of Stephen Barnes. "I was driving, and then I saw you, and -" He lost control of his emotions and began to cry. "God, I'm sorry! I am so sorry!!"

Stephen Hodges looked down at his body, badly mangled from the collision. He could not move anything, could not feel anything, other than a severe pain in his chest. He knew this was it.

Stephen Barnes began crying, "Oh God, oh God, what have I done? Stephen, what can I do? I'm calling an ambulance, you just wait here and -"

Stephen Hodges reached up with what little strength he had and grabbed Stephen Barnes' shirt. "Wait, Stephen. There's something I have to tell you."

"What is it?"

"There was a reason this is happening, and I can't explain it or even understand it all, but I know what I have to do. I just want you to promise me a few things."

"Anything - anything at all!"

"This won't make any sense, but I want you to promise me that you will be there for your son someday. Don't let the horrors of reality blind you to your responsibilities. Things will never be perfect, but you are not powerless. You can be a loving husband, and you can be a wonderful father, just as you've been to me. Your future is not hopeless."

"Stephen, I don't understand. Why are you telling me this?"

"Just listen to me!" Stephen choked as blood from his internal wounds began to clog his throat. "You have to do this. You won't understand it now - you may never understand - but you have to trust me. Don't blame yourself for this, please."

Stephen Barnes was now sobbing. "I can't do it, I can't. I'm not strong enough. How can I ever forgive myself for this? Sorry, Stephen, but I *have* to call an ambulance. I can't let you die."

"You have to, Stephen...you have to accept it! This isn't your fault...this isn't your fault." Stephen Hodges' skin was growing paler by the minute, but he continued, "Do one more thing for me. There was a man I met when I was young. We only talked once, but his words have changed my life. If you have a son, I want you to name him after that man. His name was Paul."

"Whatever you want, Stephen; you got it."

"Thanks, Dad."

Stephen Hodges breathed his last, his body lying broken in the middle of the road. Police cars and ambulances arrived several minutes later. Flashes of red and blue soon illuminated the solemn scene. Stephen Barnes crouched over the lifeless corpse of a man he barely knew, a man he would never truly know or understand. Try as he might, Stephen knew in his heart he would never forgive himself.



## Chapter 8



*"Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord."  
"And let perpetual light shine upon him."*

Paul Barnes recited the words under his breath as he stared blankly down into the open grave where his father's casket lay. Stephen Barnes was never the best father, but he was always Paul's father. Paul did not doubt that Stephen loved him, but he also knew the two of them had never fully understood each other.

The months leading up to Stephen's death had dragged painfully by, but nothing could lessen the hurt Paul felt when his father left him. Not even the certainty of the situation made it easier for anyone close to the Barnes family. The doctors had been able to predict Stephen's death as the brain tumor spread dramatically in his final weeks. Stephen spent the last several days of his life lying blind in a hospital bed, the tumor damaging his retinas beyond repair.

Everything had changed, however, a few days before Stephen's funeral. Paul's mother had handed him a note, still sealed, with his name crudely scrawled across the front. She told him with a quavering voice that she had been given specific instructions not to give him the note until then. Paul could still remember opening the letter and slowly pouring over every word as he held back tears.

*Dear Paul,*

*I can't expect you to understand or make sense of what has happened. I've struggled myself to understand why I have to suffer through this, why I had to put my family through such agony. What I do know is brief, but I need to share it with you all the same.*

*I don't have much to show for my time here, but I have always been proud to call you my son. I know I'm not the best at showing emotions, let alone expressing love to those I truly care for. If anyone deserves more than I gave them, it's you, and for that I am sorry. You should have been my crowning achievement, my biggest joy, and my closest friend, but instead, I pushed you away. I was never the father that I should have been to you, and my only comfort comes in knowing that you won't fail to keep this promise – the promise of being the best father you can be – like I did.*

*Lastly, I want you to live a normal life without me. It's okay to mourn, but don't let it consume you. It had to happen this way, and nothing you could've done would've changed that. You can't change the past, Paul – only the future. That's why you have to accept it and move on. Holding on too long will only bring misery, like it has for me. I love you, Paul, and I always will.*

*Love,  
Dad*

Paul was not sure how many times he had read the letter since then; he had lost count. He was sure, however, that he had read it enough. As a cold rain began to fall, Paul walked slowly to the edge of the open grave and crouched down. He reached into his coat and pulled out an envelope. Inside were two things Paul would never need again – his father's letter and an old faded photograph. With a final glance around him, Paul dropped the envelope into the grave, where it fluttered down and came to rest atop the coffin.

When Paul stood up, his eyes met those of a tall man in a dark overcoat. The man walked towards him and paused when he reached Paul's side.

"Paul – don't ever wonder if you were never supposed to be here, or if you're missing out on something somewhere else," the man said in a gruff voice.

"What did you say?" Paul asked, staring into his soft grey eyes.

The man shrugged. "Just something I've repeated to myself over the years." With that, the man disappeared into the crowd before Paul could question him further.

Paul turned from the grave and began to walk away, towards his mother, towards his new life – and away from everything else. He smiled, knowing that his father would finally find the rest he had sought for so long. And for the first time in his life, he knew he would, too.



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